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The Conceptualisation and Measurement of Issue Ownership

STEFAN WALGRAVE, ANKE TRESCH and JONAS LEFEVERE

Issue ownership means that some parties are considered by the public at large as being more able to deal with, or more attentive to, certain issues. The theory has been used to explain both party behaviour – parties are expected to focus on owned issues – and voter behaviour – when a voter considers a party to own an issue, this affects the odds of voting for that party. The purpose of this article is, first, to provide a look backward at the existing research through a literature review of the studies that were conducted in the past decade-and-a-half. Secondly, it takes stock of the current conceptualisation and argues that issue ownership is a multidimensional concept. Thereafter the article discusses how this multidimensionality affects both the role of issue ownership in voter and in party behaviour. Finally, the article outlines a number of shortcomings of the extant literature and discusses potential avenues for future research.

Defined broadly, issue ownership refers to the link between specific parties and issues in the minds of voters. The party that is most strongly linked to a given issue by the voters is said to ‘own’ the issue. In operational terms, issue ownership means that some political parties are associated with specific issues, and considered best able to deal with them.

Students of parties and voters consider issue ownership both as a determinant of *citizen* voting behaviour and as a determinant of *party* behaviour. On the one hand, voters make their choice by evaluating parties in their dealings with the issue(s). When a party’s issues dominate the campaign, voters tend to cast their ballot for this party. On the other hand, parties are expected to focus their campaign on ‘owned’ issues and to sidestep issues that are linked to their opponents. This dual use of issue ownership in political science goes back to the founding fathers of the concept: Petrocik (1996) used issue ownership in the US to explain presidential candidates’ selective issue emphases and aggregate election outcomes, Budge and Farlie (1983a) – inspired by Robertson’s (1976) foundational analysis – relied on issue ownership mainly to account for election outcomes in Europe (and in other work also to explain party

behaviour; see Budge and Farlie 1983b). Ever since, the double usage of issue ownership has remained a consistent feature of the literature (note that some of this literature works under another header, and speaks about ‘issue competence’; see for example Green and Jennings 2012). Although the pioneering work on issue ownership in Europe in the 1980s (Budge and Farlie 1983a, 1983b) and a little later in the US (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik *et al.* 2003) was immediately picked up by the scholarly community, relatively little empirical work on issue ownership was actually done. Only in the early 2000s did issue ownership research start to boom. For the voters’, due to dealignment and decreasing ideological divides, short-term factors such as issues started to carry more weight in voters’ decisions (Dalton 1984; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Concurrently, and partially in response to these developments, new forms of party organisation developed, less focused on ideology and the representation of specific social groups but favouring a pragmatic use of political issues (for a review, see Krouwel 2006). Parties have become more aware of the strategic importance of issues and the potential advantages of issue ownership. Consequently, work on issue ownership as a determinant of party behaviour also witnessed a distinct rise during the last decade.

The rise of attention has not led to firm conclusions about the effect of issue ownership on voters and parties, though. Both issue ownership traditions have produced mixed evidence. Amongst studies that focus on the role of issue ownership in voters’ electoral behaviour, some studies find issue ownership perceptions to affect individual voting behaviour directly (Bellucci 2006; Green and Jennings 2012), whereas others find only indirect effects in combination with issue salience (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Walgrave *et al.* 2012), or effects mediated by ideology (Van der Brug 2004).

Regarding the role of issue ownership as a determinant of party behaviour, several studies find that parties do privilege owned issues (Brazeal and Benoit 2008; Budge and Farlie 1983b; Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik *et al.* 2003; Sellers 1998). But many recent studies demonstrate that ‘issue trespassing’ or ‘issue convergence’ – parties addressing issues owned by *another* party – is a frequent occurrence (Arceneaux 2008; Brouard *et al.* 2012; Damore 2004; 2005; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Holian 2004; Sides 2006; 2007; Sigelman and Buell 2004). As a result, much of the recent research has focused on the causes that motivate parties to address the same issues. Scholars referred to the ‘state of the world’ (Budge and Farlie 1983b), to the issues dominating the party system (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010), or to short-term campaign dynamics (Damore 2004; 2005; Spoon *et al.* 2014) to explain issue convergence. Thus, despite the increased scholarly attention on issue ownership, the effects of issue ownership on both voters and parties are not yet fully understood and seem to be more complex than initially assumed.

In this article we take a step back and focus on the concept of issue ownership itself. Taking stock of extant research on issue ownership, we first discuss the diverging *conceptualisations* of issue ownership, and then make an inventory of existing *measures*. We show that issue ownership has several

dimensions and plead for an explicit multidimensional conceptualisation and measurement. We then outline the *implications* of this multidimensionality for the role of issue ownership as a driver of voter and party behaviour.

Diverging Conceptualisations

Issue ownership has mainly served as an *independent* variable to explain voter and party behaviour. Students from both traditions tend to consider issue ownership as a given that does not need much explanation. They have not given much thought to the conceptualisation of issue ownership since it was just an independent variable. The result is a good deal of different conceptualisations being used next to each other. Only recently have some scholars started to treat issue ownership as a *dependent* variable, focusing on its origins (e.g. De Bruycker and Walgrave 2013; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave and De Swert 2007) and studying its dynamic nature (e.g. Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009; Martinsson *et al.* 2013; Tresch *et al.* 2015; Walgrave *et al.* 2009; see also Martinsson and Dahlberg in this special issue). This led to a renewed debate about what issue ownership actually is.

Table 1 contains, apart from the earliest conceptualisations by Petrocik (1996) and by Budge and Farlie (1983a), the definition (and the measurement: see next section) of issue ownership in a selection of 35 recent, English-language studies that explicitly draw on issue ownership theory. Studies that only implicitly used issue ownership are not incorporated; nor are studies that explicitly draw on issue ownership theory but do not define or measure the concept. Scholars seem to agree that issue ownership refers to the connection between issues and parties in voters' minds. Some parties are connected by more voters to an issue than others. But what this 'connection' precisely entails is not entirely clear and has been defined in several ways.

Most definitions of issue ownership form a mixture of at least two dimensions. Walgrave and co-authors (2012) have recently referred to these two dimensions as the 'competence' and the 'associative' dimensions of issue ownership. Simply put, competence issue ownership refers to parties' perceived capacity to competently handle and 'resolve' particular issues, whereas associative issue ownership refers to the spontaneous identification between some parties and some issues, regardless of competence. Both party and voter studies tend to mix these dimensions. In the current special issue, for example, Budge defines issue ownership as parties' perception of what their foundational issues are – which clearly refers to holding a history of attention on an issue, and thus associatively owning an issue. Yet it also implies that parties (probably) have a reputation for being competent. Our literature review in Table 1 illustrates this duality. As the words printed in italics in the second column demonstrate, many definitions in the literature refer to both dimensions. However, few authors have explicitly conceptualised issue ownership as a multidimensional concept (for exceptions, see Bellucci 2006; De Bruycker and Walgrave 2013; Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014; Lachat 2014; Walgrave *et al.* 2012).

TABLE 1
DEFINITIONS AND MEASUREMENT OF ISSUE OWNERSHIP IN 35 RECENT STUDIES

Source	Definition	Measurement
Budge and Farlie (1983a: 24–5)	Parties are perceived as ‘owning’ certain issue types when they are <i>associated</i> and <i>identified</i> with these issues due to <i>good</i> government performance on the issue	Issue emphases in party manifestos (assumption that they reflect voters’ associations between issues and parties)
Petrocik (1996: 826)	A reputation of being <i>better able</i> than another party/candidate to handle (resolve or fix) a problem that the country is facing because voters believe that the party/candidate is more sincere and <i>committed to do something</i> about the problem	‘Which political party, the democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling each of the following issues?’
Bélanger (2003)	Issue ownership refers to political parties’ recognised capacity or reputation to <i>deal competently</i> with a number of issues and problems	‘Which federal political party do you think can best handle the problem of...?’ (five issues included in the analyses)
Damore (2004: 391)	A reputation for party’s <i>ability to handle</i> certain issues which provides candidates of that party <i>credibility</i> over issues <i>associated</i> with their party	No direct measurement; classification taken from Petrocik (1996) and Petrocik <i>et al.</i> (2003)
Benoit and Hansen (2004: 144)	Parties have come to be <i>associated</i> with a set of issues and voters tend to believe that one party or the other is <i>better</i> at dealing with a given issue	‘Which political party do you trust to do a better job handling this issue?’
Holian (2004: 97)	The close <i>association</i> of parties with certain issues so that citizens have come to take for granted the party’s <i>competence</i> in handling these issues	‘Which presidential candidate do you trust to do a better job on crime?’ (slightly different question wording from poll to poll)
van der Brug (2004: 211–2)	Parties own an issue when they have a relatively <i>good</i> reputation in the policy area and this is related to the perception of the voters to what extent the problem is a <i>priority</i> for the party	‘Not all parties consider every issue equally important. One party devotes special attention to crime prevention, while another party pays more attention to a cleaner environment. I would like to ask you, according to you, how important or unimportant various issues are for the various parties’ (1–10 scale)
Sides (2006: 411)	The reputations parties have develop from <i>effective</i> policy-making on certain issues. The crucial variable is the perception of parties (candidates) as <i>credible</i> : as <i>concerned</i> about and <i>committed</i> to an issue	(question wording different from poll to poll)
Bellucci (2006: 550–1)*	Issue ownership implies a long-term perspective and focuses on policy <i>priorities</i> . Some parties are more <i>sensitive</i> to, and <i>best</i> , at handling some problems as opposed to party competence, which ‘can have a different, and more limited, time frame and addresses the realm of parties’ <i>capacity to deliver policies</i> ’ (‘handling-performance factor’)	Issue ownership: issue priorities of the electorate broken down by vote choice. Party competence (IT): which coalition is best able to handle a set of nine policies. Party competence (UK): ‘Which party do you think can best handle that problem? (=the most important problem according to the same respondent)?’/‘Which party is best

(Continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Source	Definition	Measurement
Aalberg and Jenssen (2007: 119)	Voters believe the party has the <i>best policy</i> to solve the particular issue and that the party is considered to be most <i>dedicated</i> to the issue	at managing the country, supposing there were economic difficulties?' 'In your opinion, which party has the best policy on [ISSUE]?' + 'In your opinion which party is most engaged with [ISSUE]?'
Walgrave and De Swert (2007: 37)	Parties are <i>credible</i> and <i>reliable</i> on certain issues, they are considered as being <i>better</i> able than others to handle the problem at hand	'Which party is best placed to deal with [ISSUE]?'
Hayes (2008: 380)	As a result of consistent attention and policy action, the public comes to view the party as <i>adept</i> at handling particular issues	No direct measurement, categorisation of party ownership based on results of Petrocik (1996)
Arceneaux (2008: 1)	Political parties both acquire and cultivate reputations for the <i>ability</i> to address some issues <i>better</i> than others	'Regardless of how you usually vote, do you think the Republican or Democratic Party would do a better job on the following issues?' (1 = Democrats; 7 = Republican)
Bélanger and Meguid (2008: 478)	Parties hold a <i>reputation</i> of competence, or <i>credibility</i> , regarding specific issues initially based on the policy <i>stances</i> they adopt and the constituencies they seek to attract	'In your view, which party would be best at [ISSUE]?' (issues formulated in a certain direction, e.g. 'cutting taxes')
Egan (2008: 9)	Issue ownership is based on voters' assessments of the <i>competency</i> of parties to solve particular policy problems. Issue-owning parties have policy <i>expertise</i> regarding specific issues with allows them to better <i>achieve</i> the outcomes they promise to the public	'Please tell me if you think the Republican Party or the Democratic Party could do a better job in each of the following areas. Which party could do a better job of dealing with [ISSUE]?'
Green and Hobolt (2008: 462)	Parties have a stable reputation for greater <i>competence</i> regarding certain issues	'I would like you to tell me which party has the best policies on each problem'
Brasher (2009: 69, 87)	Parties have an enduring <i>association</i> with particular issues and <i>credibility</i> in dealing with those issues	Different question wordings drawn from different surveys: 'Which party would do a better job with [ISSUE]?', or 'have more confidence in', 'do a better job with', 'do better on', 'trust more', 'do a better job of dealing with', 'has the best ideas', 'which party in Congress does a better job of handling', 'will do better in the next four years', 'best job', 'do more to improve'
Therriault (2009)	Idem Petrocik (1996)	'Which party do you think would do a better job handling each of the following issues?' and 'Which party do you think has better ideas for handling each of the following issues?' and 'Which party do you think is better qualified to handle each of the following issues?'

(Continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Source	Definition	Measurement
Walgrave <i>et al.</i> (2009: 154)	Voters <i>identify</i> parties with issues. If voters think about the issue, they think about the party. Issue ownership is a matter of reputation: Parties are <i>credible</i> and <i>reliable</i> on certain issues, considered as being <i>better</i> able than others to handle the problem at hand	'How competent, according to your opinion, is [PARTY] to determine [ISSUE] policy? Give a score between 0 and 10 where 0 stands for completely incompetent and 10 for extremely competent'
Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010: 5)	Voters systematically see parties as having different problem solving <i>competences</i> on different issues, which generate rather time-persistent party ownership of different issues	–
Dahlberg and Martinsson (2011)	–	'What is your opinion about the parties' politics for [ISSUE]?' (a scale for each party from 1 = very bad to 7 = very good)
Green and Jennings (2012)	–	'Which party do you think can best handle that problem? (= the most important problem according to the same respondent)'
Stubager and Slothuus (2013: 2)	Issue ownership implies that voters at large perceive one party to be particularly <i>competent</i> and <i>dedicated</i> to take care of an issue or concern	'Here is a list of problems and we'd like to hear who you think is better at solving each problem: a Social Democratic-led government or a bourgeois conservative government. Who is best at [ISSUE]' (issues formulated in a certain direction, e.g. 'keeping taxes down')
Walgrave <i>et al.</i> (2012: 2)*	<i>Competence</i> issue ownership (CIO) refers to whether parties are considered to be the 'best' to deal with an issue. <i>Associative</i> issue ownership (AIO) refers to the <i>spontaneous identification</i> of parties with issues in the minds of voters, regardless of whether voters consider the party to be the most <i>competent</i> to deal with these issues	AIO: '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.' CIO: 'How suitable do you think each of the following parties is to deal with the issue of X?' (closed list of 10 issues)
Lachat (2014: 2)*	Issue ownership points to a central form of <i>association</i> between parties and issues. Some parties can develop a <i>reputation</i> of <i>competence</i> and <i>attention</i> in some political domain and be considered to 'own' the corresponding issue	'Which party cares the most about [ISSUE]?' and 'Which party has the best solutions for [ISSUE]?' (issues formulated as dilemmas, e.g. joining or staying out of the European Union)
Banda (2013: 4)	Certain issues have become <i>associated</i> with parties in the sense that they are perceived by the electorate to be 'owned' by one of the parties. Citizens on average believe the party that owns an issue is <i>better able to handle</i> problems related to that issue than parties that do not own the issue	–

(Continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Source	Definition	Measurement
Guinaudeau and Persico (2013)	Issue ownership (proprietary issues) refers to a situation in which only one party devotes attention to an issue while expressing only one specific position towards it	Issue emphases in party manifestos. Counting of words devoted to 69 different European policy issues
Meyer and Müller (2013: 486)	If a party's perceived <i>competence</i> is substantially greater than that of the competing parties on those issues and if this advantage prevails over a longer time period, then parties can be said to 'own' the issue	'Which party displays the strongest commitment to solving this problem; is the most competent concerning the problem?'
Martinsson et al. (2013: 131)	Voters <i>identify</i> parties with issues and if they think about an issue they also think about a party. Issue ownership is a question of <i>reputation</i> . Which party is most <i>competent</i> to handle a certain issue	'Are there any party or parties that according to you have a good/bad policy on [ISSUE]?'
De Bruycker and Walgrave (2013)*	Ibid.; Walgrave et al. (2012)	Ibid.; Walgrave et al. (2012)
Tresch et al. (2015)*	Ibid.; Walgrave et al. (2012)	Ibid.; Walgrave et al. (2012)
Walgrave et al. (2014)*	Issue ownership is the perceived – according to voters – <i>competence</i> of parties to deal with an issue and implement the <i>best</i> policies	Ibid.; Walgrave et al. (2009)
Kleinnijenhuis and Walter (2014: 2)*	A party owns an issue when a large group of voters <i>attributes</i> this issue to this party and considers this party to be <i>best equipped</i> to deal with that particular issue	'Which issues come to mind in the first place (and in the second place) when you think about [PARTY]?'
Wagner and Zeglovits (2014: 280)	Over time, parties develop reputations for <i>competence</i> on certain issues	'Which party is best at handling [ISSUE]?'
Dolezal et al. (2014: 62)	Parties stress those areas where they are perceived as <i>competent</i> by the electorate	'Which party is the most competent with respect to [ISSUE]?'

Note: Studies marked with an *use an explicitly multidimensional conceptualisation of issue ownership.

The ambiguity of mixing the associative and competence dimensions is already present in the initial definitions of Petrocik (1996) and Budge and Farlie (1983b). Budge and Farlie explicitly refer to parties' 'good performance' and to the 'identification and association' of specific parties with specific issues. Similarly, Petrocik's definition states that some parties are 'better able' to deal with an issue, suggesting that these parties are more competent. At the same time, he introduces an associative dimension when asserting that some parties are perceived by the voters as more 'sincere' and 'committed' about an issue given their 'history of attention, initiative, and innovation' towards it

(Petrocik 1996: 826; Petrocik *et al.* 2003: 601). Petrocik and colleagues (2003: 601) regard this ‘mere association’ of a party with an issue as a major asset in their effort to persuade voters; it is an indicator of which problems will be tackled by the party. This matters, because the key fact for voters is not only what policies parties or candidates promise to pursue, but what problems (or issues) will be resolved. Most voters do not want a problem to be tackled in a specific way, says Petrocik (1996: 830), they just want it to be ‘fixed’ in any way and they trust that the party with the strongest reputation will do that fixing the right way.

Subsequent work employed similarly ambivalent conceptualisations of issue ownership. Damore (2004) states that issue ownership is both a perception of an ability (competence) as it is a matter of being associated with issues (see also Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). Holian (2004) puts the associative element first and the competence element second. Walgrave *et al.* (2009) explicitly mention the (spontaneous) identification between issues and parties in their definition. Sides (2006), and some other authors with him, speak about the ‘credibility’ of a party, which implies that they appear ‘concerned’ about and ‘committed’ to an issue. Walgrave and De Swert (2007) refer to the same when they talk about parties being considered to be ‘reliable’ on certain issues. In a similar vein, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) consider issue owners to be more ‘dedicated’, which suggests that issue ownership is a matter of the issue’s ‘priority’ for a party, as also argued by Van der Brug (2004) and Bellucci (2006).

The short conceptual overview summarised in Table 1 establishes that the least one can say is that issue ownership has been defined ambiguously. Scholars often refer to different dimensions of issue ownership (competence and association), but rarely explicitly recognise this multidimensionality. Additionally, while most scholars define issue ownership in a similar (two-dimensional) way, their definitions are neither verbally nor substantially identical; some see the associative dimension as a matter of credibility, others as a matter of priority and dedication, but scholars almost never address (the implications of) these conceptual differences (for a similar observation see Therriault 2009).

Similar Competence Measurements and Measurement Problems

The literature yields diverging signals as to what issue ownership *is*. At first sight, there seems to be less inconsistency about how issue ownership can be measured in survey research (see also Therriault 2009: 4). A certain divide, unsurprisingly, exists between studies of party and voter behaviour.

Some *party studies* rely on survey data to measure voters’ aggregate issue ownership perceptions which are then assumed to determine party behaviour (Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik 1996). Other party studies do not tap issue ownership perceptions by voters but assume that issues to which parties devote most attention (in press releases, party manifestos, party leader speeches, or campaign ads) are owned by the party and are perceived as such by the voters

at large (see for example Budge and Farlie 1983a; Guinaudeau and Persico 2013; Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Taken over a longer period of time, these measures tap a party's 'history of attention' for an issue. Because most studies of party behaviour gauge only issue attention their measurement seems to focus mainly on parties' associations with issues rather than on their competence to deal with issues. Employing party manifesto salience as a measure of issue ownership, as some party studies have done, is problematic. Saliency in party communications is an important cause or consequence of issue ownership – the link between issues and voters in the mind of voters – but it is not the same thing.

Voting scholars assess issue ownership based on surveys asking voters to score parties on issues. The third column of Table 1 shows that questions are almost always variations of the 'best party to deal with an issue' formulation. The foundational American National Election Study (ANES) wording reads: 'Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling each of the following issues?' (this formulation is, for example, used by Benoit and Hansen 2004; Petrocik 1996). The variations on the ANES question wording are manifold. In many cases (see for example Benoit and Hansen 2004 study) the issue ownership measure is filtered by a preceding 'most important problem' question so that there is no individual-level information about ownership of a list of issues. In our overview of 35 studies, a large number of similar but not identical questions are used: 'can best handle', 'is best placed', 'would be best at', 'could do a better job', 'would do a better job of dealing with', 'have more confidence in', 'is better qualified', 'is most competent', 'is better at solving', 'is most suitable to deal with' etc. So, while most definitions of issue ownership contain both competence and associative aspects, current measurements of issue ownership have mostly focused on the competence dimension.

However, some have raised doubts regarding the classic competence measurement of issue ownership. Two problems exist: competence measures may be endogenous with the vote and they may not only tap competence but also agreement in terms of policy positions. Competence is likely to be strongly affected by party preference and therefore a tricky predictor of voting behaviour. In fact, party identifiers tend to name their preferred party as the most competent to deal with almost any issue (for evidence from Canada see Bélanger and Meguid 2008: 483; see also Wagner and Zeglovits 2014). Thus, 'best at' indicators not only measure the competence of parties on specific issues, but also tap into general evaluations of parties (Van der Brug 2004: 213; see also Stubager and Slothuus 2013). As a consequence, the direction of the causal arrow between the evaluation of which party is best able to deal with an issue and party choice is all but clear (for experimental evidence see Walgrave *et al.* 2014; for longitudinal evidence in the UK, see Green and Jennings 2012). Hence, competence issue ownership may be endogenous and not useful as a predictor of the vote (Kuechler 1991; Van der Brug 2004). None of these studies, though, suggested that the endogeneity of competence

issue ownership may be dependent on the issue at stake. For some issues, party identification may drive competence evaluations while it may be the opposite for other issues. Fiorina (1981) stated that party identification is a running tally of past performance evaluations; this suggests that party preference is a *consequence* of competence perceptions. We suspect this to be the case for issues that are salient to the voters: they let their party preference be determined by parties' performance on the issues they care about and devote attention to. For minor issues, it may be just the opposite. Voters do not have the information to evaluate parties' performance on these issues since they do not care about them; thus, in this case, it may their party preference that drives their issue competence perceptions.

In addition to this endogeneity problem, the standard measurement of competence issue ownership may also tap into issue *positions* of respondents and not just the competence of the parties to deal with the issue (Van der Brug 2004: 213). To find out what the traditional issue ownership question really measures, Theriault (2009) conducted a survey wording experiment. He used a classic competence measure ('Which party do you think would do a better job handling each of the following issues?') and two additional questions; the first cueing respondents to base their responses on competence considerations ('Which party do you think is better qualified to handle each of the following issues?'), and the second cueing respondents to base their responses on positional considerations ('Which party do you think has better ideas for handling each of the following issues?'). He finds that the three measures, while correlated, are by no means identical. Most importantly, he shows that the traditional issue ownership question is most susceptible to partisan bias, and that it taps into both competence *and* positional considerations. Theriault's findings are important as they demonstrate that previous studies, while always relying on a variation of the standard competence question, probably do not measure the same underlying construct.

Recent work by Stubager and Slothuus (2013) also explicitly discusses the relationship between party and voter positions on the one hand and competence issue ownership on the other. They use a measure of competence issue ownership ('better at solving') and find that there is a significant and positive effect of positional congruence (measured by Likert items) on competence issue ownership. So, they show that positional agreement correlates with competence issue ownership.

In a similar vein, Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) interviewed 20 people in depth to assess how they answered the classic competence issue ownership question ('Which party is best at handling [ISSUE]?'). Although the classic question aims to measure competence, the interviews show that many people draw on the salience of the issue for the party (association) and on their knowledge of the party's position on the issue to answer it. Wagner and Zeglovits speak about 'strong evidence' that people factor in salience (association) and position when responding to competence questions. So, even when issue ownership is apparently measured unidimensionally (by only referring to

competence in this case), it appears that people draw not only on their competence evaluations but also their associational and positional beliefs regarding the issue and the party.

Note that some studies claiming to tap into (competence) issue ownership do not employ a competence cue but rather an explicit positional cue. Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) ask ‘Which party has the best policy on [ISSUE]?’ A similar observation applies to Green and Hobolt (2008) (‘has the best policies on each problem’), Brasher (2009) (‘has the best ideas’), Lachat (2014) (‘has the best solutions’), and Dahlberg and Martinsson (2011) as well as Martinsson *et al.* (2013) (‘has the best politics’). It appears that answers to these issue ownership questions with an explicit positional cue are incomparable with questions trying to assess directly, and only, the competence dimension of issue ownership – a task in which they most likely fail if we follow the cited work by Theriault (2009), Stubager and Slothuus (2013), and Wagner and Zeglovits (2014).

The dominance of question formulations that aim to tap competence issue ownership has been complemented by only a handful of studies that, explicitly or implicitly, capture the associative dimension of issue ownership. As early as in 2003 Van Hoof *et al.* (2003) explicitly tapped into the spontaneous link between parties and issues by asking: ‘Which issue do you think of in the case of [PARTY]?’ (see also Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). Van der Brug (2004) asked respondents to estimate the importance that Dutch parties devote to various issues: ‘I would like to ask you, according to you, how important or unimportant various issues are for the various parties.’ Similarly, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007), asked in Norway ‘In your opinion, which party is most engaged with [ISSUE]?’ The most recent Swiss national election study, as reported by Lachat (2014), also contains an associative question: ‘Which party cares the most about [ISSUE]?’ And the Austrian national election study recently asked voters ‘Which party displays the strongest commitment to solving this problem?’ (Meyer and Müller 2013). The probably most explicit associational issue ownership question was put in the 2009 Belgian election study: ‘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’ (Walgrave *et al.* 2012).

In the Norwegian, Belgian and Swiss cases not only associative but also competence questions were available. Analyses show that the associative and competence dimensions of issue ownership are correlated on the *individual* level – they are higher on the aggregate level – but the strength of the correlations is small (e.g. Walgrave *et al.* 2012). Association and competence are two different things; people can associate a party with an issue without considering this party to be the best to deal with the issue, and vice versa. No studies examined it, but it is plausible that the correlation between the two dimensions of issue ownership depends on the concrete issue at stake. On valence issues – where all parties basically want the same but some parties want it more than

others (Stokes 1963) – the correlation between competence and associative issue ownership may be higher than on positional and controversial issues where parties publicly dissent. Applied to European multiparty systems, for example, we expect Green parties to own the environment as an issue both associatively and in terms of competence but we do not expect the same to be the case of the populist right-wing parties' ownership of immigration.

In sum, both the voter and party traditions of issue ownership combine the competence and the associative dimension in their conceptualisation. It appears that some studies focusing on party behaviour emphasise parties' attention to an issue (implicitly linking it to associative issue ownership) while studies focusing on the individual vote are dominated by competence measures. Also, the exact question wordings are diverse and wording appears to make a difference; it is unclear whether the different competence measures can be compared. Additionally, competence issue ownership seems to be at least as much a consequence of party preference as it is a cause of party preference. And answers to competence questions appear to be affected by positional and associative heuristics. To complicate things further, some issue ownership questions contain explicit positional cues. Most likely answers to these questions cannot be compared to the ones in response to competence questions. Finally, there seems to be a recent movement towards the inclusion of explicit associative issue ownership questions in election studies.

Implications for Research

The multidimensionality of issue ownership has implications for future research, both for voter and for party research. First, the distinction may help us understand which issues a party may be able to 'steal' from another party. Recent experimental research has shown that parties are unable to steal issues that voters associate with other parties (Tresch *et al.* 2015). In contrast, they are able, by amply communicating on an issue, to turn voters' perception of their competence of dealing with an issue to their advantage (Walgrave *et al.* 2009). So, while parties may successfully challenge extant competence issue ownership, especially in case of bad performance of the incumbent (Arceneaux 2008; Petrocik 1996), they experience more difficulties in attacking other parties' associative issue ownership. The latter strategy may even prove counter-productive in the short term because emphasising issues that are associated with other parties tends to reinforce voters' existing perceptions of issue ownership and play into the hands of the issue owning party (Tresch *et al.* 2015). Yet it may be possible for parties to become associative owners of issues that have not traditionally figured in a party's programme but only if the party pays attention to the issue over a long period of time. For instance, the Swiss People's Party has transformed from a small agrarian party into a large national-conservative party and has, as a result of this process, become the associative owner of the immigration issue in Switzerland (Varone *et al.* 2014).

Hence, whereas short-term tactical decisions to trespass on an issue may help a party win competence issue ownership, only a repeated and long-term focus may eventually turn the party into an associative issue owner. Yet even a long-term strategic trespassing on issues that are traditionally associated with another party may eventually not be successful. The traditional associative owner of the issue has incentives to continually emphasise this issue – not only to prevent other parties from stealing it, but also because they may actually be ‘stuck’ with associatively owned issues. Ignoring issues for which a party has a long history of attention may be electorally costly if core party supporters expect their party to attend to these issues (see the paper by Ian Budge in this special issue, see also Egan 2013).

The possibility to steal an issue depends on the party system. In two-party systems, associative and competence issue ownership are likely to overlap strongly. Egan’s (2013) work shows that US Democrats and Republicans are perceived to be more competent on their owned issues *and* they have a long-standing history of attention to these same issues. In multiparty systems, parties can hold long-standing associations with issues but they have more difficulty in showing competence on them – for example, by being in opposition or because they do not hold the relevant ministerial post if they are in government. This leads, we expect, to more differences between competence and associative issue ownership in multiparty systems, and thus to different strategic challenges for parties when attempting to claim ownership. In sum, we do believe that distinguishing both dimensions is not just a matter of conceptual fine-tuning but that it can help us to make better sense of what happens when parties and voters deal with issues. Both dimensions are (modestly) correlated of course, but they are analytically very different and lead to distinct hypotheses about how parties and voters behave.

Second, accounting for the multidimensional nature of issue ownership may also prove fruitful for research into the origins of issue ownership. Party research has examined issue ownership mainly in terms of the attention given to issues. Yet parties’ attention and commitment to certain issues is only one possible source of voters’ issue ownership perceptions. For instance, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) have identified four sources: voters’ partisanship, attitudes, performance evaluations, and links with traditional constituencies. Hence, taking explicitly into account the dimensions may help us to examine how parties try to claim ownership of issues: do they just repeatedly emphasise issues, underline their past performance, claim the superiority of their policy solutions, or consistently appeal to certain segments of the electorate?

Third, though positional considerations were an integral part of saliency theory (Budge and Farlie 1983b; Dolezal *et al.* 2014), many of the studies investigating the role of issue ownership on party behaviour do not test or control for positional considerations. But positions are important to consider. Saliency theory does not expect parties to emphasise *any* issue they own. They are expected to emphasise issues on which they hold positions that a majority of the public favours. That said, in more recent work, Budge (in this Special

Issue) argues that parties are ‘stuck’ with their owned issues. In such cases even owned issues with unfavourable positions may get emphasised. Similarly, Egan (2013) suggests that regarding owned issues ‘politicians actually tend to ignore citizens’ preferences when crafting policy on these issues’. Nevertheless, comparative empirical evidence on the impact of positions on party behaviour, and how this relates to issue ownership, is lacking.

Also extant voter research on issue ownership has hardly incorporated issue positions (but see Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Lachat 2014). Given the potential confusion between party preference and competence issue ownership, this is a gap worth noticing. Some work has shown that competence and associative issue ownership have an effect on people’s vote choices, but it has also shown that these relationships are moderated by party preference and issue salience. However, since party preference only captures a broad agreement with a party, differences in terms of positional agreement on specific issues may have effects above and beyond what extant research has documented. Given the earlier research, we expect the moderating effect of issue position to be related to both competence issue ownership and associative issue ownership (Lachat 2014). For example, having more competence ownership on an issue may override less positional agreement on an issue, because voters desert the less competent party and vote for a party with which they do not fully agree but that can get the job done. In fact, Lachat (2014) showed for Switzerland that positional agreement matters more for associative issue ownership: having a history of attention on an issue does not matter that much to voters who disagree with the party’s position.

The role of positions points to a more general outstanding issue. Though the extant research has shown that issue ownership affects people’s vote choices, it is yet to move beyond this finding and develop a better understanding of *how* it is that issue ownership affects the vote. One potential mechanism through which ownership may affect people’s vote choice may be source credibility. The owner of an issue being considered a (more) credible source on the issue – be it through its history of attending to the issue, or displaying competence on the issue – voters may be more attentive to the owner during the campaign (see paper by Lefevere *et al.* in this special issue). Similarly, sources with high credibility are more persuasive than low-credibility sources (Pornpitakpan 2004). Another hypothetical mechanism could be the ‘running tally’ idea advanced by Lodge *et al.* (1990). When parties pay attention to or display competence on an issue over an extended period of time, ownership evaluations may serve as a running tally of the parties’ performance in dealing with an issue. Though memory of the specific achievements may fade over time, the tally remains and serves as a summary evaluation of the party on the issue. Nevertheless, these three mechanisms are speculative at best, which exemplifies that the causal mechanisms of issue ownership’s effect on the vote need to be addressed in future research.

A second outstanding challenge is that existing work has relied on a wildly varying set of issue ownership measures. This has hampered comparative work,

which is the logical step forward: now that the effect of issue ownership on people's vote choices has been more or less established in separate countries, specifying the contextual variables that moderate this effect would result in a more general framework to model issue ownership effects on electoral behaviour. Either comparable measures need to be implemented across countries, or we need to establish the extent to which these measures differ from one another.

Conclusion

Our literature review incorporating a large number of recent studies on issue ownership can only lead to the conclusion that the field of issue ownership is scattered and that results are blurred. Although political scientists during the last 15 years have frequently used issue ownership to account for voters' and parties' behaviour, they have often not referred to the same thing. Additionally, students of voters and parties measure issue ownership not infrequently in a way that is not compatible with how they define it. So, under the apparent consensus, we found a good deal of divergence in concepts and measurements. Remarkably, until very recently, there was no conceptual or measurement debate amongst issue ownership scholars. Except for a handful of cases, few have reflected on the substance of the construct or on the measures used to assess it (the exceptions include Bellucci 2006; Lachat 2014; Therriault 2009; Van der Brug 2004; Walgrave *et al.* 2012).

As it is obvious that issue ownership is a multidimensional phenomenon – the links in people's heads between parties and issues are varied – we strongly plead to make the multidimensionality explicit in conceptualisation and measurement. There is, at least, a competence dimension and an associative dimension, and they must be tapped with distinct questions. Also, people link parties with issues because they agree with the parties' position, or because the party's position is conspicuous. That is why positional considerations must be factored in when issue ownership is used to predict voting. A nice example of this is a recent study by Lachat (2014). He uses a measure of associative issue ownership ('cares most about') and a measure of positional voter–party distances on six items. He shows that both together, in *interaction*, affect the vote. For people who associate a party with an issue (association) it is more important for the vote whether they agree with the policy of the party (position) compared to people who do not associate the party with that issue. In other words: position matters more when association is high. Lachat also uses a competence issue ownership measure ('best solution') and finds that competence issue ownership interacts less strongly with position than associative issue ownership.

The multidimensionality of issue ownership has thus far not been incorporated at all in studies of party behaviour. However, whether a party is associated with an issue, or rather has high competence on an issue, may have differential effects on its behaviour. Scholars have argued that associations are built up over longer time spans, often decades. Thus, trespassing on associatively owned issues may entail high short-term costs for parties since it implies

challenging another parties' history of attention on an issue. Conversely, competence issue ownership is more variable, and parties may be able to grasp issues over the course of a campaign or over the course of a single legislature (Walgrave *et al.* 2009).

Wrapping up, considering issue ownership as a multidimensional phenomenon allows us to investigate in a more precise way what issue ownership does to parties and to voters. A more complex and multifaceted conceptualisation, we believe, will not hinder progress by creating conceptual confusion and navel-gazing, but rather the opposite. It leads to stimulating new hypotheses about the diverging effects of different types of issue ownership for different issues in different countries. And it may explain why previous work often came to contradicting conclusions. In short, the multidimensional turn in issue ownership research can further boost a field of research that is already thriving but that has not yet led to robust generalisations and that has not yet identified a distinct set of mechanisms.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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