SPECIAL ISSUE - ISSUE COMPETITION - The Limits of Issue Ownership Dynamics: The Constraining Effect of Party Preference

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The Limits of Issue Ownership Dynamics:

The Constraining Effect of Party Preference

Abstract

Extant work argues that when a voter considers a party to be most competent to deal with an issue (it is the issue owner) chances increase that this voter will vote for the party. Recent work has shown that such issue ownership is dynamic: it is affected by media coverage of party messages. However, the broad literature on partisan bias predicts that such efforts will have a hard time passing the perceptual screen that is imposed by a voter's party preference. We predict that media effects on issue ownership perceptions are also subject to this moderating effect of party preference. Using two separate experiments with a similar design we show that the effect of partisan issue messages on issue competence is moderated by preceding party preference. The effect of issue messages is reinforced when people already like a party, it is blocked when people dislike a party.

Introduction

Parties compete over issues both electorally and in terms of policy making. One of the major assets in this struggle is parties' 'issue ownership'. Issue ownership has a competence and an associative dimension (Walgrave et al. forthcoming): Whereas competence issue ownership is the perceived—according to voters—competence of parties to deal with an issue and implement the best policies, associative issue ownership designates the spontaneous association between an issue and a party in the minds of voters, regardless of whether voters consider the party to be the most competent to deal with these issues. In line with most previous work, we focus on the

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competence dimension of issue ownership, which connects the electoral and policy aspect of the issue competition amongst parties.[1] It links the beliefs of voters (electoral) to parties' real, or perceived, performance on issues (policy).

From an issue ownership perspective, issue competition between parties implies that parties predominantly compete over issues by attempting to shift the political debate, and the political agenda, towards issues they are considered competent on. The early literature on selective issue emphasis (see for example Budge & Farlie 1983b) claimed that parties mostly talk past each other as they each avoid talking about issues owned by another party while preferring to address those issues they have a strong position on—that is: the issues they 'own'.

However, apart from sticking to one's own issues, parties also have another option; they can try to gain ownership on issues they do not own or do not have a strong reputation on yet. New research has spent growing attention to the changeability and the dynamic character of voters' issue ownership perceptions (see for example Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009; Green & Jennings 2012; Walgrave et al. 2009). This work suggests that issue ownership actually does shift over time and that parties, by performing well while in government or by communicating effectively about an issue, can gain ownership on issues they scored low on before. This article engages with this recent work on issue ownership dynamics and challenges the notion that issue ownership is for the taking by any party.

Drawing on two survey-embedded experiments in COUNTRY during the campaigns of the 2007 and 2009 elections we show that the effects of issue messages are strongly constrained by preceding party preference. Issue messages by parties already liked by the subjects have a

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[1] For reasons of convenience, we simply use the term 'issue ownership' when actually referring to 'competence issue ownership'. This is also what mainstream issue ownership work has implicitly done.

significantly larger impact on the updating of the perceived issue ownership of the party. Issue

claims by disliked parties do not affect the issue ownership score. Preceding party preference, in

other words, moderates the effect of parties' issue claims. Parties are only able to reinforce their

standing on an issue amongst voters who already prefer the party but their efforts seem to be in

vain when it comes to convincing voters who dislike the party. So, issue ownership is dynamic, it

changes as a consequence of party messages, but the effect thereof on the vote seems to be

limited as party supporters are the most keen to update their beliefs about their party whereas

party opponents remain unaffected.

Issue Ownership Dynamics

Issue ownership theory, as originally developed in Europe by Budge and Farlie (1983a; 1983b)

and in the US, inspired by earlier work by Stokes (1963) and Petrocik (1996), has a double aim.

First, as a theory of candidate behavior and party competition, it explains which issues are

emphasized (or downplayed) during election campaigns. The theory holds that parties and their

candidates attempt to mobilize voters by selectively focusing their campaign efforts on issues on

which they hold a reputation of competence—so-called 'owned' issues—and to avoid issues on

which their competitors are perceived to have a better handling capacity. By increasing the

salience of owned issues during an electoral campaign—by strategically talking about their

issues in their party manifesto, in their electoral communication, and in the media—parties can

affect their electoral fortunes and gain electoral support (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994).

Second, as a theory of individual voting behavior, issue ownership theory predicts that

individuals make their voting decision based on their evaluation of the issue handling reputations

of each party: when a voter thinks a party is best able to deal with an issue, chances increase that

this particular voter will cast a ballot for that party. Whereas the inventors of the issue ownership theory have tested the theory by its ability to predict election results on the aggregate level (Budge & Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), subsequent scholars have focused on issue ownership as a determinant of the individual vote. In a study on British and Italian voters, for example, Belucci (2006) showed that the more a voter considers a party to be best to deal with an issue, the better the chances that she votes for that party. In a similar vein, a good deal of recent studies examined, and substantiated, the effect of issue ownership on the vote (sometimes in interaction with issue saliency) (Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Green & Jennings 2012; Green & Hobolt 2008; Nadeau et al. 2000; but see for an opposite account: van der Brug 2004). In sum, issue ownership not only explains party behavior but also individual voting behavior.

Recently, scholars have started to investigate the origins, and thus also the dynamic character, of issue ownership. Issue ownership has a stable and a dynamic aspect. This duality of issue ownership was already present in Petrocik's (1996) defining formulation of the theory. The stability comes from the fact that parties are identified with and connected to socially distinctive constituencies and promote issues in their supporters' interest (see for example: Stubager & Slothuus 2011). As a result, parties become the owners of the issues their constituency cares about and this does not change overnight.

Although most of the research has treated issue ownership almost as a constant, issue ownership has a dynamic aspect as well. A host of recent studies has shown that issue ownership is dynamic and changeable. Parties' ownership scores go up and down and issue ownership is not a fixed asset (see for example: Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009; Green & Jennings 2012; Stubager & Slothuus 2011; Walgrave et al. 2009). Some of this recent work also has provided a straightforward answer as to how come issue ownership changes over time. Parties are able to

affect their ownership of an issue by addressing the issue in their external communication and convincing the public that they are capable of dealing with it. If parties talk persuasively about an issue they may change how competent they are perceived by the public (Aalberg & Jenssen 2007; Walgrave & De Swert 2007; Walgrave et al. 2009). Note that not only 'talking' but also 'doing' (while in government) may affect how competent parties are perceived to be (see for example: Green & Jennings 2012; Petrocik 1996; Stubager & Slothuus 2011)—but here we focus on the talking only.

Parties do their talking to the public in their party manifestos, in their interventions in parliament, in their press releases, but probably most, and most effectively, in their appearances in the mass media. Such media appearances are especially relevant for issue ownership as a theory of voting behavior, because voters get most of their political information from the mass media (De Vreese 2010). Parties constantly address issues in their public communication in the media. This is the essence of their public performances: talking about the issues of the day claiming that they are the best party at dealing with it. This is exactly what the inventors of the issue ownership concept were after in the first place: explain why some parties publicly address some issues frequently and ignore other issues. The founders drew on issue ownership to explain party communication, recent work showed that party communication explains issue ownership opening up a new research domain on issue ownership dynamics.

The Constraining Effect of Party Preference

This study speaks to the current work on issue ownership dynamics and examines, by means of an experiment, whether the effect of party messages on voters' perception of issue ownership is selective. We expect the effect of party messages to be constrained by preceding party

preference. Parties may affect their perceived ownership by publicly addressing the issue but only among voters who already consider the party as likeable and who support the party. Messages by disliked parties are discarded and filtered away, while messages by already liked parties are reinforced and affect the party's standing on the issue as perceived by the treated subject. Pre-existing party preference moderates the effect of parties' issue communications, we hypothesize.

The idea of selective acceptance depending on one's partisan preference is, of course, not new. In fact, it goes back to the very founders of the field of electoral studies who showed that party preference (party identification) conditions many political evaluations and perceptions (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Campbell c.s. (1960: 133) state: "*Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation*". Partisan preferences act as a filter through which performance of parties, and thus also their issue handling reputation, is assessed (Bartels 2002). The reasons for this political conditioning effect are numerous, for example the need for cognitive consistency or simple partisan loyalty (Evans & Andersen 2006).

Partisan conditioning effects have been found to be rather strong and pervasive. Evans and Andersen (2006), for example, found that perceptions of the state of the economy in the UK were not so much driving party preferences but just the opposite: they were the consequence of existing party preference. Earlier these authors showed for the British case that this was also the case for other issues: perceptions of issue proximity between parties and voters were affected by party identification, rather than the other way around. Evans and Andersen even drew the conclusion that issue perceptions and proximity measures cannot be taken as independent determinants of voting decisions as they are the consequence of party preference (Evans &

Andersen 2004). The finding that political conditioning even occurs with perceptions of basic facts like how the economy is doing—notions that should be more disconnected from direct political evaluations than explicit partisan issue ownership evaluations—reinforces the expectation that issue ownership evaluations are affected by party preference (see also Bartels 2002).

Another way to look at the effect of party preference on issue ownership evaluations is the literature on rationalization by voters (see for example: Rahn et al. 1994; Wawro 2006). Based on broad theories of cognitive inconsistency (Festinger 1957) this work holds that people, consciously or unconsciously, try to avoid contradictions between their different attitudes or beliefs. So, when confronted with a message of a party and having to evaluate a party's ownership on the issue at stake, people draw on their pre-existing *general* attitudes regarding that party to make up their mind and produce an answer regarding their evaluation of a party's ownership on a *specific* issue (see for a similar logic Stubager & Slothuus 2011).

In political communication, work on media effects and partisan messages has shown that exposure and acceptance of messages diverges widely based on pre-existing preferences. People tend to avoid exposure to messages about and from parties they dislike (Iyengar et al. 2008) and, when effectively exposed, a lot of the incoming information is not accepted but filtered away. This is the basic tenet of Zaller's (1992) RAS-model. One of Zaller's core claims is that existing predispositions (together with political awareness) affect the acceptance of new information. If (politically aware) people encounter information that runs counter to their predispositions, chances are high that they will not accept the information, and will not adjust their opinion: "*People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their predispositions*" (Zaller 1992: 44). We expect this to be true for issue ownership evaluations as well. When people are

confronted with a party messages on a certain issue, they will more easily accept this message

and increase the party's issue ownership score when they already are positively inclined towards

the party; when people, in contrast, consider the communicating party not to match their own

views, the exposure to issue statements will not affect their perception of the party's issue

ownership. Hence, party preference is the critical moderating variable between parties' issue

messages and subsequent issue ownership evaluations.

A different take within the broad field of political communication to the same issue,

finally, is the literature on source credibility. This literature states that the acceptance and

persuasiveness of a message depends on the credibility of the source. The less a source is

credible, the less the source's message sticks (for an overview, see: Pornpitakpan 2004). Applied

to the effect of party messages on issue ownership, we would expect that parties that are disliked

by a voter would not be considered as a credible source while parties that are liked would.

Consequently, the persuasive effect of party messages is reinforced for preferred parties while it

is blocked for non-preferred parties.

Wrapping up, work on selective acceptance, partisan conditioning, rationalization, and

source credibility all suggests that the effect of party messages on issue ownership evaluations is

moderated by pre-existing party preference. We will examine this expectation after we present

our data in the next section.

Data and Methods

We draw on two survey-embedded experiments. The experiments were part of the

UNIVERSITY Web Panels 2007 (UNIVERSITYPANEL07) and 2009

(UNIVERSITYPANEL09) in the run-up to the federal elections of 2007 and the regional

elections of 2009 in COUNTRY. Though regional and federal elections take place at different

levels, in essence the parties and politicians that participate in both elections are highly similar:

due to the centrifugal transferring of powers to the regional level, these elections have gained

prominence and therefore the electoral context for both experiments is highly similar (Van Aelst

& Lefevere 2012). The 2007 panel used four waves (three pre-electoral, one post-electoral) but

in the present article, we only use data from the first two waves (wave 1 was on-line from March

7th until March 28th; wave 2 ran from April 16th until May 7th). Similarly, for the 2009 panel, we

only rely on the first two pre-electoral waves, but not on the post-electoral wave (wave 1 was on-

line from March 20th until April 28th; wave 2 was on-line from May 27th until June 7th). For each

experiment, we only include subjects that participated in both waves, were exposed to the

treatment, and answered all relevant questions. Before applying the experimental treatment in the

second wave we pre-measured all relevant dependent and independent variables in the first wave.

Immediately after the treatment in the second wave, we re-measured issue ownership. In total,

1,365 respondents qualified for inclusion in 2007 and 613 in 2009. Our subjects form no

representative sample of the COUNTRY population. However, representativeness is not our aim

because our experimental design is primordially aimed at achieving maximum internal validity.

That said, we do dispose of a relatively diverse sample of respondents in the two experiments:

the sample includes both young and old respondents, highly politically interested and less

politically interested respondents, and so forth. Given that many experiments use samples that

consist merely of students, we feel that our samples are adequate for the purpose of this study

(Iyengar 2001).

    The treatment consisted of exposure to a fake news item embedded in a longer and real

excerpt of the main evening news, NAME, of the COUNTRY's public broadcaster STATION.

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NAME is the most popular news show in COUNTRY. We took a real news show broadcasted a few weeks before the experiment and added the stimulus, which was a fabricated news item described in greater detail below. The stimulus was preceded by a very short real news item, and followed by two other real news items. Respondents in the control group were exposed to the exact same fragment, minus the stimulus. The total excerpt lasted approximately three to four minutes.

The stimulus consisted of a short news item lasting thirty seconds containing one leader of one of COUNTRY's five main parties talking about a political issue. The news anchor introduced the fake item stating: "*In a few weeks, we have general elections. In the run-up to these elections we, each day, give the floor to a party to explain their position on an issue. Today we have X (politician) of Z (party) who will give us their party's opinion on A (issue).*" The anchor announced the news item in the well-known NAME news studio wearing the same clothes as when announcing the previous and the following real news items. The news item was announced as a routine item; it was by no means special or conspicuous. It was not reinforced with footage; it only showed a standard and well-known political head talking in a perfectly normal environment (e.g. party headquarters with party logo in the background). The politicians' intervention was not triggered by a spectacular real-world event but was presented as routine coverage in the run-up to the elections. The interviewee was not emotionally talking or drawing attention by large gestures or appealing images, he was just calmly exposing his party's point of view regarding the issue. In sum, the stimulus was as routine as a news item can be; respondents had probably seen hundreds of similar news items before and, as the experiments were conducted in the campaign period, they most likely had been exposed to similar items in the very days before.

Party leaders of the main parties were briefed beforehand and were prepared to deliver short statements about a number of experimental issues. In 2007 the issues were climate, crime, pensions, tax, family policy and defense. In 2009 they were environment, crime, and development aid. We provide a few sample transcripts of statements in appendix A. Party leaders did not have to lie or play a fake role; they voiced their party's real views. The only restriction we imposed to them was that their statement should approximate thirty seconds and that it should be on topic. All party presidents were motivated to deliver a strong statement, as one of the authors could observe during filming the clips. Every leader came prepared with written notes and was accompanied by his/her spokesperson. Furthermore, all party presidents decided to record multiple takes for each statement on each issue in order to get their message 'right'. Naturally, this does not eliminate all differences between party presidents—some of them were better at voicing a clearly structured argument than others. However, the overall quality of the statements was high and generally comparable across parties and issues.

In 2007 we did not randomly assign the respondents to the conditions but stratified the panel's entire population on age, sex, education, party preference, and political interest. For an experimental design, randomization is preferable, but a post-hoc analysis showed that due to the large amount of respondents randomization would have yielded identical distributions of key variables across conditions. In 2009, the respondents were randomly assigned to the different conditions. After the elections, participants were fully debriefed by email explaining that they had been exposed to a fake news item and that the results of the experiment would be used for scientific research.

Table 1 provides an overview of the various conditions for both 2007 and 2009, and the number of subjects that was exposed to the stimulus and that answered all relevant questions for

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the analysis. As should be clear from the table, the 2009 experiment had substantially less respondents per group than the 2007 experiment. This lowers the statistical strength of the 2009 results, which we take into account when we discuss them. Other than the lower amount of exposed respondents per condition, conditions are very similar for 2007 and 2009: in both experiments the stimulus lasted 30 seconds, and the format was identical. In the actual analyses, we aggregate across conditions because we are interested in the overall moderating effect of party preference on issue ownership change.

<Table 1 around here>

For the issue ownership measurement, our dependent variable, we draw on the classic question: "*How suitable do you think each of the following parties is to deal with the issue of X?*". Each party was scored by each respondent and for each issue included in the experiment on an 11-point scale (0=completely unsuited – 10=completely suited). As a measure for party preference, our key independent variable, we used following question: "*What do you think of the ideas of the parties? Give each 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 party preference instead of party choice because it presents a more fine-grained variable: party choice would only tell us which party the respondent preferred *most*. Party preference, on the other hand, has the advantage of providing a gradual measure of preference for each party: instead of only knowing that a green voter did not vote for the socialists (party choice), we now control for the fact that this voter might still have a somewhat positive attitude towards the socialists (party preference).

In appendix B, we provide an overview of the distribution of key variables such as pre-exposure issue ownership, political interest, and various socio-demographic variables across the different conditions in the experiments. As should be clear from these tables, in both experiments

the treatment was independent of the moderating variable (party evaluation), issue ownership, and various confounding variables.

Our modeling strategy is a multilevel one. We stack the dataset so that each respondent is represented by a number of different observations: all individual party-issue links evaluated by all single respondents form the records. As a consequence, each respondent is represented by a number of issue-party combinations (e.g. socialist party x environment). This results in a maximum of 42 combinations (6 issues * 7 parties) for each respondent in 2007 and 36 combinations (6 issues * 6 parties) in 2009. By using such a stacked file, we can estimate an aggregated model across issues and across parties. We are not interested here in differential effects between voters. The reason we employ a multi-level model, thus, is purely statistical: to correct our estimates for possible errors introduced by the duplication of observations in the stacked dataset (Steenbergen & Jones 2002: 219-220). Note that we also do not deal with differences between parties and between issues either. The control group consists of 195 people in 2007 and 108 in 2009 who were exposed to the same news video without the fake item with the talking party leader. Added to that, for the subjects who *have* been exposed to a talking politician regarding a particular issue we consider the issue ownership score they attribute to *other* parties on *other* issues as being part of the control group. This might create a bias if other issue ownership scores were affected by the treatment. However, we tested whether such 'spillover' effect existed—that is: whether exposure to one party president on one issue affected other issue ownership scores. This was not the case. So, the models below compare the issue ownership effect of exposure to a news item with a given party and a given issue with the issue score of people not exposed to messages of that party and on that issue.

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Results

Table 2 and Table 3 present multi-level linear regressions of the experiments conducted during

the electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2009. Exposure to a party message regarding an issue is one

of the key independent variables (0-1). Party evaluation (scale 0-10) is the other independent

variable of interest. The dependent variable in all models is the issue ownership score of a party

(scale 0-10) attributed by a certain respondent after exposure (or not) to an issue message by this

party in wave two.

<Table 2 and Table 3 around here>

The tables each contain a direct effect model, and a model with an interaction effect between

party evaluation and exposure. As we explain below, the 2009 table contains two additional

models. In both 2007 and 2009, model 1 shows that issue ownership in wave one, before

exposure, is a strong predictor of issue ownership in wave two, after exposure. There is a lot of

stability in issue ownership. People do not change their evaluation of parties' ability to deal with

an issue overnight. If the wave one issue ownership score increases with one point (on an eleven

point scale), the score in wave two increases with about half a point (0.54 in 2007 and 0.48 in

2009). The effect of party evaluation is very significant as well, and only slightly less strong.

How a party is evaluated in wave one, before exposure, matters a lot for the score this party gets

on any issue in wave two, after exposure. Per one point increase on the eleven-point party

evaluation scale, the increase of post-exposure issue ownership is 0.35 in 2007 and 0.41 in 2009.

This may not seem substantial but since we deal with two extended scales, it is. The difference in

average issue ownership scores between a voter that considers a party to be absolutely worthless

(score '0') and a voter that considers the same party to be the best possible party (score '10')

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amounts to 3.85 points in 2007 and 4.51 in 2009. Note that this substantial party preference

effect comes *on top* of the path-dependency effect of preceding wave one issue ownership.

The effect of exposure differs between 2009 and 2007. While both coefficients are

positive, the effect of exposure is highly significant in 2007 (0.20 (.04), *p = .000*) but fails to

reach significance in 2009 (0.08 (.06), *p = .223*). This can partially be explained by the lower N

in 2009 but the coefficient itself is smaller. In 2007, exposure to party messages made a

difference: people adjusted their issue ownership perception of a party when they were exposed

to the party leader talking about the issue. The 2009 results seem to suggest otherwise: exposure

to the exact same type of stimulus seems to have an effect that goes in the same direction but not

significantly so.

The reason is a confounding factor in two conditions in 2009: as Table 1 documents, two

of the five treatment conditions contained the Liberal party (Open VLD) leader Bart Somers.

However, between waves 1 and 2 of the 2009 experiment this particular party leader was caught

in a scandal: in a document he promised an MP from another party a four-year salary

(government paid) when he would defect his present party and join his own. The document was

made public on May 5th, after wave 1 and before wave 2 of the experiment. While we have some

measures on the drop in his personal evaluation between wave 1 and wave 2—his average

evaluation on an 11-point scale was 5.4 in wave 1, and dropped to 4.9 in wave 2—no such

measures are available for 2007 which makes it hard to compare regression results if we would

include additional controls. To account for this, models 3 and 4 present the regression results for

the 2009 data if we exclude the conditions that contained Bart Somers. Even with the lower N,

model 3 shows that exposure now has a strong and significantly positive effect (0.33 (.08), *p <*

.000). Thus, the impact of the scandal on Bart Somers' effectiveness to convey political

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messages is clearly present. As such, the 2009 coefficients reported in model 1 and 2 should be interpreted in this light and we suggest models 3 and 4 to be a better representation of the generic effect yielded by party messages.

Model 2 for 2007 and model 4 (without Somers) for 2009 incorporate an interaction term between party evaluation and exposure to a party message regarding the issue. Including the interaction term, the main effect of exposure to a party message completely disappears both in 2007 and 2009; coefficients hardly differ from zero. This means that there is no effect whatsoever from exposure when the party score is at its minimum (zero). People who very much dislike a party are not at all affected by the party leader claiming to have the best policy regarding a given issue. So, the potential change in issue ownership due to exposure to a party message is entirely blocked by a low party evaluation. Both in model 2 of 2007 and model 4 of 2009, the interaction term of party evaluation x exposure to party message is significantly linked to the issue ownership score after exposure (model 2 of 2009 does not yield significant results for the interaction term, but as we explain above there is a substantial confounding factor in the Liberal party conditions). In 2009 the interaction effect is only slightly significant (0.05 (.03), *p = .071*), but this is mainly due to the smaller N (402): the coefficient itself is the same as in 2007. Furthermore, the calculation of correct standard errors (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006) uncovers significant marginal effects of exposure at various levels of party evaluation in 2009. What this all basically means is that the effect of exposure to party messages largely runs *through* preceding party evaluation. What people think about a party determines how they will react to a message by that party. The positive sign of the interaction effect implies that party evaluation reinforces the effects of exposure.

Since the interaction effect finding is so central to our argument, we calculated the marginal effect of exposure for each increasing value on the party evaluation scale, with correct standard errors. We follow the method proposed by Brambor et al. (2006:70) because in both 2007 and 2009 the covariance between exposure and its interaction term was negative, correcting for this brings about significant marginal effects even though the overall interaction term is insignificant. In both experiments, the marginal effect of exposure started to become significant from a party evaluation of four and upwards (0.16 (.07) in 2007, and 0.28 (.09) in 2009).

Thus, across all issues and parties, respondents that were exposed to a 30-second clip featuring a politician talking about an issue, gave that party a 0.16 / 0.28 point higher score on the issue compared to respondents that were not exposed to the clip—if they rated the party as generally unfavorable (score of four) before exposure. The effect of media visibility is small for parties that respondents do not like in general. For a moderately evaluated party (6) the effect of exposure in 2007 is 0.26 (.07) and 0.38 (.09) in 2009, and for a highly evaluated party (9) the effect was 0.41 (.02) and 0.58 (.16) in 2007 and 2009, respectively. This shows that the effect of exposure is more than double the size for a highly liked party than it is for a moderately disliked party (while it is completely absent for a totally disliked party). Figures 1 and 2 plot the interaction effect for each experiment.

<Figure 1 and 2 here>

The interaction plots show highly similar results in the two separate experiments: party evaluation affects the effectiveness of media messages on post-exposure issue ownership. Parties do have a chance to increase their ownership on an issue amongst people that like them, or that at least hold a neutral position towards them. Amongst voters that dislike them, such efforts will yield little to no effect. The conclusion to draw is clear: people who already think highly of a

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party adjust their issue ownership perception of that party more than people who dislike the party. Party evaluation is the critical intervening variable blocking (if party scores are very low) or reinforcing (as party scores get higher) the effect of new incoming information on the issue ownership of parties.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study addressed the emerging literature on issue ownership dynamics. Recent work has found that issue ownership—the perception voters hold about which party is best at handling a given issue—is not a stable but a variable asset of parties. Issue ownership evolves over time, parties can win or lose ownership, their issue evaluations are subject to both short-term and long-term changes. One of the ways parties can gain ownership of an issue is by talking about it, by addressing the issue in their own external communication such as press briefings, speeches, advertisements, and messages distributed via general news coverage. The core idea buttressing this article was that, although changeable, there are constraints to issue ownership change that can be brought about by communication. Pre-existing party preference, we argued, acts as a perceptual screen that confines the effect of party messages.

To test this idea, we set up two survey-embedded experiments in COUNTRY; both experiments were almost identical but the political context and the concrete stimuli differed. The experiments directly tested whether party evaluations act as a moderator on incoming party messages meant to increase issue ownership. Our results support the idea that issue ownership perceptions are constrained by party preference. The experiments document that party preference imposes a filter on the effect of party messages on issue ownership. Party preference blocks or reinforces the effect of party messages. This finding is in line with earlier work both in political

science as in communications: party preference acts as a filter through which political information is processed (Campbell et al. 1960); information that does not fit a given predisposition towards a party is rejected, information that confirms one's predispositions is eagerly accepted (Zaller 1992). Issue ownership *is* dynamic, but the change is limited and tends to confirm pre-existing party preference.

In terms of voting—and against a growing literature that finds an effect of issue competence evaluations on the vote—this result suggests that classic issue ownership measures may not be very useful, or valid, as causes of the vote. Because they only tap the competence dimension of issue ownership, they seem to be too much dependent on preceding party preference. The causal relationship between competence issue ownership and the vote is more complex than most extant work on issue ownership has recognized. Competence issue ownership is potentially endogenous to the vote, a consequence of the vote rather than a cause of it. Some recent literature already hinted in that direction (Jennings & Green 2011; Kuechler 1991; Stubager & Slothuus 2011; van der Brug 2004; Van Der Eijk et al. 1999).

A limitation of the study is the fact that we only took into account the 'talking' by parties and not their 'doing'. Naturally, it is almost impossible to do otherwise in an experimental study—how could one expose some subjects to the real issue performance of a party while keeping other respondents 'shielded' from this performance? But our design leaves open the question whether real acts by parties and their tangible performance may have an effect on issue ownership evaluations that is independent of preceding party preference. It may be the case that, notwithstanding the highly communicative character of modern day politics, people react differently to speech acts than to, for example, real rising inflation or unemployment. We cannot exclude this possibility. Yet, cited work by Evans and Andersen (2006; 2004) and Bartels (2002)

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substantiates that even perceptions of economic reality are conditional on party preference suggesting that also the effect of reality, in this case the performance of parties, is dependent on partisan affiliation.

A second limitation is that we only have data from one country. What may have affected our results is the fragmented character of COUNTRY's party system. Indeed, most research on issue ownership has been undertaken in two- or few-party-systems. In multi-party systems, parties stand on average closer to each other and issue ownership is more contested (Aalberg & Jenssen 2007). There are, for example, two or more left-wing parties fighting over ownership of the welfare or the environmental issue. This may entail that the changeability of issue ownership is larger in multi-party systems while it is a more stable party asset in two-party systems. On the other hand, average party identification and loyalty is probably higher in two-party systems which could imply that the filtering and reinforcing power of party evaluations could be even stronger in two-party systems. In short, it would be interesting to pursue similar designs in two-party systems.

Third, the stimulus applied in this study is based on a one-shot exposure. We basically show that a single exposure to parties talking about an issue is not able to overcome the constraints imposed by preceding party preference. In the real word, of course, people are frequently exposed to many, iterative messages by parties. Whereas a one-shot exposure may not affect issue ownership, it is possible that at higher levels of exposure and visibility effects do appear that surpass the constraining effect of pre-existing party preference. This article was not able to address this matter empirically but enduring and recurring issue messages may be able to overcome the barrier imposed by party preference.

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Despite these limitations, our study has real-world implications for parties' communication strategies. Most basically, given that voters' previous party preference moderates the effect of issue messages on their evaluation of parties' issue handling competence, parties cannot ignore voters' partisanship when competing over policy issues. This is similar to the conclusions of previous work by Adams et al. (2005) who show that parties can gain votes by presenting policies that appeal to voters who support them for non-policy reasons (because they identify with the party or present sociodemographic characteristics that correlate with certain policy beliefs). In other words, parties will not be successful in convincing voters of their issue handling competence if these voters do not like them in the first place. Thus, instead of trying to change the minds of voters who sympathize with their competitors, parties should engage in two alternative strategies. First, and most importantly, our results suggest that parties have incentives to preach to the converted—those who consider the party's issue competence as high and who most likely already vote for the party. Second, parties may try to reach with their issue messages the lukewarm public that does not dislike the party but may not be a party voter yet. This specific group of voters will not a priori reject the party's message and may be convinced of the party's issue handling ability and, maybe as a consequence, may consider voting for the party.

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Tables

Table 1: *Overview of Experimental conditions*

2007 experiment	N
Green Party President on Environment	191
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	203
Socialist Party President on Crime	193
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	188
Liberal Party President on Defense	200
Green Party President on Defense	195
Control Group	195
2009 experiment	**N**
Green Party President on Environment	89
Liberal Party President on Crime	120
Liberal Party President on Development aid	91
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	112
Socialist Party President on Environment	93
Control group	108

Table 2: *Multi Level linear regression predicting post exposure (wave 2) issue ownership score - <u>2007</u> experiment*

	Model 1 Exposure			Model 2 Interaction		
Fixed effects						
Issue ownership pre exposure (wave 1)	0.54	(.00)	***	0.54	(.00)	***
Party Evaluation (wave 1)	0.35	(.00)	***	0.34	(.00)	***
Exposed to Party Message on Issue	0.20	(.04)	***	-0.01	(.09)	
Exposed to Party Message on Issue* Party Evaluation				0.05	(.02)	**
Constant	0.68	(.02)	***	0.69	(.02)	***
Random effects						
Respondent-level variance	0.38	(.02)		0.38	(.01)	
Issue-Party-level variance	1.95	(.01)		1.95	(.01)	
Log Likelihood	-102067.49			-102065.91		
N_i / N_j	1365/57330			1365/57330		

*Note. ** p < 0.01, *** p < .001.*

Table 3: *Multi Level linear regression predicting post exposure (wave 2) issue ownership score -* <u>*2009*</u> *experiment*

	Model 1 Exposure			Model 2 Interaction			Model 3 Exposure, without Liberal party conditions			Model 4 Interaction, without Liberal party conditions		
Fixed effects												
Issue ownership pre exposure (wave 1)	0.48	(.00)	***	0.48	(.00)	***	0.47	(.01)	***	0.48	(.00)	***
Party Evaluation (wave 1)	0.41	(.00)	***	0.41	(.00)	***	0.40	(.01)	***	0.40	(.00)	***
Exposed to Party Message on Issue	0.08	(.06)		0.06	(.12)		0.33	(.08)	***	0.14	(.14)	
Exposed to Party Message on Issue * Party Evaluation				0.00	(.02)					0.05	(.03)	+
Constant	1.16	(.03)	***	1.16	(.03)	***	1.20	(.04)	***	1.20	(.04)	***
Random effects												
Respondent-level variance	0.35	(.02)		0.35	(.02)		0.40	(.03)		0.40	(.03)	
Issue-Party-level variance	1.91	(.02)		1.91	(.02)		1.91	(.02)		1.91	(.02)	
Log Likelihood	-45558.53			-45561.35			-29894.27			-29895.31		
N_i / N_j	613/25746			613/25746			402/16884			402/16884		

Note. $+ p < 0.1$, *** $p < .001$.

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Figures

Figure 1: *Moderating effect of Party Evaluation on Issue Ownership - 2007 experiment.*

Figure 2: *Moderating effect of Party Evaluation on Issue Ownership - 2009 experiment.*

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The Limits of Issue Ownership Dynamics:

The Constraining Effect of Party Preference

Appendix A: Examples of Stimuli

2007 experiment

Liberal party president on Taxes

VLD wants to lower taxes, simplify taxes, and change taxes. We want to lower them, because lower taxes create more jobs, and allow people to dispose of a larger 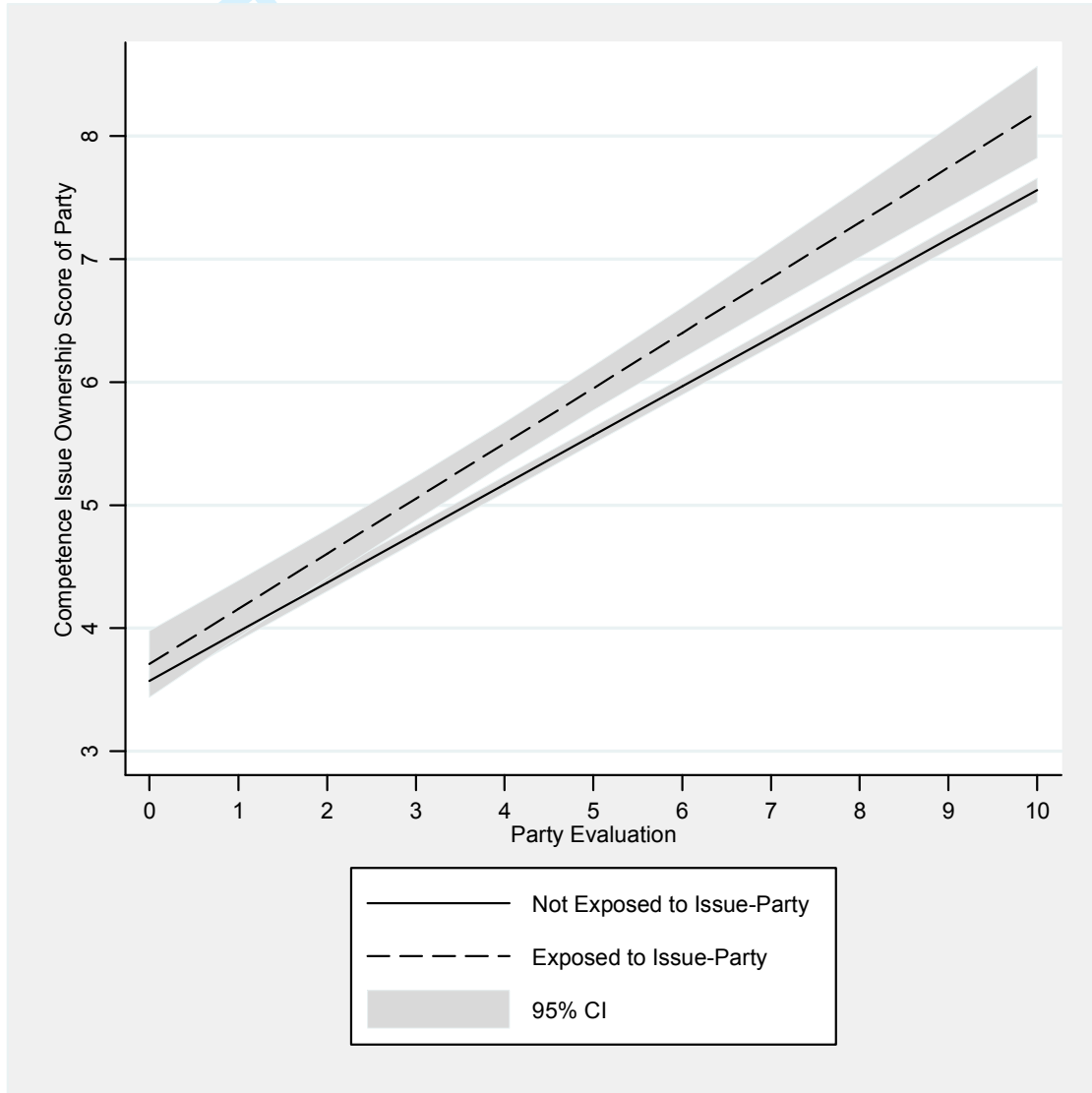part of their income. Secondly, we want different taxes: no longer taxing labor, but on polluting products. Taxing labor scares companies away from our country, destroys jobs, while taxes on polluting products also generate revenues, but in a good way. Thirdly, we want to simplify the tax system. It is currently an non transparent mess and that is only good news for tax specialists and not for the regular man in the street who does not know how to fill out his tax forms in a good way.

Green party president on Climate

According to the Green party we are facing an enormous ecological challenge to deal with the climate issue. That means that we need to radically change the energy policy, invest more in the isolation of houses, and that the government should support citizens in doing so. We also need to invest in another type of mobility: not using cars but also providing adequate public transportation and lowering the amount of freights. Finally, we need to choose environmentally friendly sources of energy: we have wind, the sun... plenty of opportunities that will also create job opportunities. In short, it is possible to deal with the climate problem, and that is what we aim to do.

Christian Democratic party president on Family policy

CD&V is going to make a better family policy a key issue for the federal elections. We feel that the federal government has never had a serious family policy in the past years. Our first priority is making sure child benefits are linked to the welfare index: this is very important for families' purchasing power. But we also think of various new policies to allow people to combine the choice to have a family and children with, for example, their jobs, taking care of other people and relaxing. More child care, longer maternity leave so it is in line with the European average, and a larger child bonus for the self-employed. Those are a few examples that will make that combination easier on people.

Socialist party president on Crime

For Sp.A crime is a form of injustice, which is something we should not subject to but should combat. We should do this firstly by prevention: community formation but also neighborhood information networks should be able to act preventively against crime. Once a crime has been

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committed one should be able to act rapidly: slow justice is injustice. Thus, a lot of prevention and a rapid reaction of justice are the two key words for Sp.A for the fight against crime.

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2009 experiment

Liberal party president on Crime

Security is a human right, that is why we must combat the causes of criminal behavior and fight crime itself. Removing the causes of criminal behavior is done by giving everyone chances and making sure nobody lives in insecurity. The primary way to achieve this is by creating sufficient jobs in society. Battling crime should be done by making sure there is no impunity. A quick and efficient justice that makes adequate rulings, and that ensures that people who do commit wrongdoings get prosecuted and sanctioned. That is what creates a secure society.

Concerning the pensions, Vlaams Belang chooses to make them welfare fixed (not sure how to translate this). That means that for the self-employed the pensions must go up with 15 per cent, but also that the minimum pensions must be raised. Apart from that we feel that next to the repartition system, we need to work on Flemish pension funds. Finally, there is the division of social security that needs to ensure that we in Flanders can make our own decisions regarding our own Flemish pension policy.

Socialist party president on Pensions

Sp.A. feels that everyone who has worked hard during their lifetime deserves a serious pension. Our Legal pensions are still much too low, that is why we want to promote raising the legal pensions. For us it does not matter whether you were an employee, employer, civil servant or whether you were self-employed: everyone deserves a high enough pension, and that is why we want to legally entrench the second pillar: make it a right for anyone who has worked.

Green party president on Environment

The environment, that means taking the limits of our planet into account. That means that you need to shift the way you should operate the economy. Not as it is now, ensuring economic growth and with its rewards you cleanse the rivers, cleanse the air, and so on. No, a green economy means an economy that does not pollute, that prevents waste, and that turns waste into resources again.

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Appendix B: Distribution of Key Variables across Experimental Conditions

2007 experiment

Table B1: Distribution of Party Preference Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

	Mean Party Preference of...						
Condition	**Greens**	**Christian-Democrats**	**Socialists**	**Extreme Right**	**Liberals**	**Flemish Nationalists**	**Social Liberals**
Green Party President on Environment	5.3	6.0	5.8	2.0	4.7	4.0	4.6
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	5.3	5.8	6.0	1.6	4.6	3.9	4.8
Socialist Party President on Crime	5.2	6.1	5.5	1.9	4.4	4.1	4.5
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	5.1	6.0	5.6	1.5	4.7	3.8	4.5
Liberal Party President on Defense	5.2	5.6	5.6	1.7	4.3	3.5	4.3
Green Party President on Defense	4.9	5.7	5.4	2.2	4.4	4.3	4.5
Control Group	4.8	5.8	5.3	2.0	4.4	4.0	4.0

Table B2: Distribution of Environment Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists	Social Liberals
			Mean Environment Issue Ownership of...				
Green Party President on Environment	7.4	5.7	6.7	1.6	4.8	4.2	5.5
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	7.3	5.8	6.7	1.4	4.5	4.3	5.6
Socialist Party President on Crime	6.9	5.7	6.6	1.5	4.5	4.1	5.2
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	7.0	5.9	6.4	1.1	4.6	4.1	5.3
Liberal Party President on Defense	7.1	5.5	6.3	1.4	4.5	3.8	5.1
Green Party President on Defense	7.0	5.5	6.2	1.6	4.6	4.4	5.3
Control Group	6.9	5.7	6.2	1.6	4.6	4.2	5.2

Table B3: Distribution of Family Policy Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists	Social Liberals
				Mean Family Policy Issue Ownership of...			
Green Party President on Environment	5.8	7.6	6.8	2.4	4.9	4.9	5.4
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	5.9	7.3	6.7	2.1	4.7	4.7	5.5
Socialist Party President on Crime	5.7	7.4	6.6	2.1	4.6	4.7	5.2
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	5.5	7.3	6.4	1.7	4.7	4.5	5.1
Liberal Party President on Defense	5.8	7.0	6.7	2.0	4.6	4.3	5.2
Green Party President on Defense	5.4	7.1	6.3	2.5	4.5	5.0	5.0
Control Group	5.3	7.3	6.3	2.2	4.7	4.5	4.9

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Table B4: Distribution of Crime Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Mean Crime Issue Ownership of...						
	Greens	**Christian-Democrats**	**Socialists**	**Extreme Right**	**Liberals**	**Flemish Nationalists**	**Social Liberals**
Green Party President on Environment	4.1	6.8	6.1	3.3	5.8	5.5	4.7
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	4.4	6.7	5.9	2.8	5.8	5.5	4.8
Socialist Party President on Crime	4.2	6.7	5.8	2.9	5.5	5.0	4.5
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	4.0	6.7	5.7	2.5	5.8	4.9	4.5
Liberal Party President on Defense	3.9	6.1	5.7	3.2	5.5	4.8	4.5
Green Party President on Defense	3.9	6.5	5.4	3.5	5.6	5.5	4.4
Control Group	3.9	6.6	5.5	3.4	5.5	5.0	4.2

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Table B5: Distribution of Pension Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists	Social Liberals
			Mean Defense Issue Ownership of...				
Green Party President on Environment	4.8	7.4	7.1	2.1	5.2	2.0	5.3
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	5.1	7.2	7.0	1.9	5.3	4.9	5.3
Socialist Party President on Crime	4.7	7.1	6.8	2.0	5.0	4.8	4.8
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	4.6	7.4	6.8	1.5	5.3	4.6	5.0
Liberal Party President on Defense	4.6	7.0	6.8	1.8	5.1	4.3	4.8
Green Party President on Defense	4.5	6.8	6.6	2.2	5.3	5.1	4.9
Control Group	4.5	7.1	6.5	2.0	5.1	4.7	4.5

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Table B6: Distribution of Defense Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists	Social Liberals
	Mean Defense Issue Ownership of...						
Green Party President on Environment	4.2	6.4	5.9	2.1	5.6	4.8	4.6
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	4.4	6.3	5.9	1.9	5.7	4.8	4.7
Socialist Party President on Crime	4.0	6.3	5.5	1.8	5.3	4.5	4.2
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	3.7	6.3	5.7	1.7	5.6	4.5	4.4
Liberal Party President on Defense	4.0	6	5.6	2.1	5.2	4.2	4.2
Green Party President on Defense	3.8	6.2	5.5	2.4	5.4	4.8	4.4
Control Group	3.7	6.2	5.4	2.1	5.4	4.4	4.1

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Table B7: Distribution of Age, Political Interest and Gender across Groups, for 2007 Experiment.

Condition	Mean Age	Mean Political Interest	Per cent Male respondents
Green Party President on Environment	41	7.9	77
Christian Democratic Party President on Family Policy	40	7.6	77
Socialist Party President on Crime	41	8.0	76
Extreme Right Party President on Pensions	40	8.1	81
Liberal Party President on Defense	40	7.8	75
Green Party President on Defense	39	8.0	76
Control Group	40	7.9	73

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2009 experiment

Table B8: Distribution of Party Preference Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

	Mean Party Preference of...					
Condition	**Greens**	**Christian-Democrats**	**Socialists**	**Extreme Right**	**Liberals**	**Flemish Nationalists**
Green Party President on Environment	4.7	5.7	4.9	1.7	4.8	5.3
Liberal Party President on Crime	5.2	5.2	5.6	1.7	4.9	4.5
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	5.5	5.4	5.9	1.4	4.7	4.8
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	5.3	4.9	5.5	1.7	4.6	4.5
Socialist Party President on Environment	5.5	5.4	5.9	1.6	5.4	4.6
Control Group	4.9	5.3	5.3	1.6	4.8	4.6

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Table B9: Distribution of Environment Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists
	Mean Environment Issue Ownership of...					
Green Party President on Environment	7.4	7.3	6.8	2.7	5.8	5.8
Liberal Party President on Crime	7.3	6.4	6.7	2.5	5.4	4.9
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	7.6	6.5	7.1	2.5	5.4	5.5
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	7.5	6.3	7.2	2.6	5.4	5.1
Socialist Party President on Environment	7.5	6.5	7.4	2.8	5.6	5.1
Control Group	7.2	6.6	7.0	2.6	5.5	5.3

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Table B10: Distribution of Pensions Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

	Mean Pensions **Issue Ownership of...**					
Condition	**Greens**	**Christian-Democrats**	**Socialists**	**Extreme Right**	**Liberals**	**Flemish Nationalists**
Green Party President on Environment	5.3	8.1	7.1	3.0	6.8	6.2
Liberal Party President on Crime	5.6	7.5	7.4	2.7	6.2	5.4
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	5.9	7.7	7.7	2.6	6.0	5.9
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	5.8	7.4	7.3	3.0	6.2	5.4
Socialist Party President on Environment	5.7	7.5	7.8	3.1	6.6	5.6
Control Group	5.4	7.6	7.4	2.7	6.5	5.9

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Table B11: Distribution of Development Aid Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists
			Mean Development Aid Issue Ownership of...			
Green Party President on Environment	6.8	7.5	6.9	2.6	6.1	6.0
Liberal Party President on Crime	6.9	7.2	7.0	2.2	5.6	5.2
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	7.1	7.1	7.2	2.1	5.8	5.5
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	6.8	6.8	7.1	2.4	5.8	5.1
Socialist Party President on Environment	7.3	7.1	7.5	2.4	6.1	5.3
Control Group	6.8	7.1	6.9	2.3	5.8	4.9

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Table B12: Distribution of Crime Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition		Mean Crime Issue Ownership of...				
	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists
Green Party President on Environment	5.1	7.6	6.1	3.8	7.3	6.9
Liberal Party President on Crime	5.2	7.1	6.3	3.5	7.1	5.9
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	5.5	7.2	6.8	2.9	7.0	6.0
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	5.4	6.9	6.4	3.6	6.7	5.8
Socialist Party President on Environment	5.3	7.2	6.6	3.6	7.1	5.9
Control Group	5.3	7.2	6.6	3.4	7.1	6.1

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Table B13: Distribution of Family Policy Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists
			Mean Family Policy Issue Ownership of...			
Green Party President on Environment	6.8	8.1	7.1	3.5	6.7	6.9
Liberal Party President on Crime	6.6	7.6	7.2	3.0	6.3	5.7
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	6.8	7.9	7.3	3.0	6.1	6.2
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	6.7	7.4	7.2	3.2	6.3	5.8
Socialist Party President on Environment	7.1	7.7	7.7	3.1	6.6	5.8
Control Group	6.6	7.8	7.0	2.9	6.3	6.0

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Table B14: Distribution of Tax Issue Ownership Pre-exposure across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition	Greens	Christian-Democrats	Socialists	Extreme Right	Liberals	Flemish Nationalists
		Mean Tax Issue Ownership of...				
Green Party President on Environment	5.4	7.7	6.4	3.2	6.9	6.5
Liberal Party President on Crime	5.2	7.0	6.5	2.7	6.5	5.5
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	5.6	7.3	7.0	2.6	6.4	6.0
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	5.5	6.8	6.5	2.8	6.4	5.6
Socialist Party President on Environment	5.3	7.1	7.0	2.9	6.8	5.5
Control Group	5.0	7.0	6.4	2.7	6.7	5.7

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Table B15: Distribution of Age, Political Interest and Gender across Groups, for 2009 Experiment.

Condition	Mean Age	Mean Political Interest	Per cent Male respondents
Green Party President on Environment	41	9.3	82
Liberal Party President on Crime	41	9.1	84
Liberal Party President on Development Aid	41	9.0	78
Extreme Right Party President on Crime	40	9.1	77
Socialist Party President on Environment	42	8.6	78
Control Group	41	8.9	76