



Master Thesis
Political Communication

**The Role of the News Media in the Shaping of
Issue Ownership**

The emergence of the “financial crisis” as a new political issue

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I dedicate this work to my father, Roger De Bruycker.

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Abstract

This study highlights news media impact on how political parties and issues in the public mind are associated. Drawing on a large survey of the Flemish public and a content analysis of two major Flemish newspapers, we argue that news media do not only transfer saliency of issues towards the public agenda, but also influence the associations made between political parties and those issues. Because the ownership of an issue is relatively stable, it is difficult to measure the sources that trigger change. Therefore, we choose to focus on the ownership of “the financial crisis”, an issue that emerged as “new” over the past couple of years. In what way did the news media co-determine the ownership of this issue? We give proof the public associated the same political parties with this issue as the news media did. We show that respondents, who were more exposed to news media, were more capable to associate a political party with this issue. In addition, we illustrate news media exposure increased the probability that someone associated the financial crisis with its owners, the ruling parties in the Belgian federal government at the time of the crisis. As a final point, we show that people who associated the financial crisis with its owners, were significantly more likely to vote for these parties.

Introduction

For decades, political scientists have been trying to unravel the mystery of voting behavior. A handful of explanations emerged, with one of them the issue ownership theory. This theory claims that voters automatically link specific issues to specific political parties and that the party who has the best reputation on the most salient issue at the time of elections, will win the public's support. But how can political parties manage the associations made between them and policy issues? Where does issue ownership come from? From literature, we know the ownership of an issue to be stable, not easily trespassing from one political party to another (Petrocik, 1996). Due to the stable nature of issue ownership, it is very difficult to measure what sources initiate it, unless a new issue emerges and comes to dominate public debate. Who will claim the ownership of this new issue and what sources lay beneath this claim? We see the financial crisis of 2008-2009 as such a new issue, dominating public debate and because of its new nature, initially unclaimed by any political party. Our main research questions are: which political party managed to claim this issue and were the news media key sources in determining the ownership in the public mind?

Before we study these questions quantitatively, we first turn to the main literature about issue ownership, to distill our own definition of the concept. A number of scholars (Buge & Farly, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011) discussed different varieties and dimensions of issue ownership. We choose to assess the most tangible variant: associative issue ownership. After defining our main concept and its relation to voting behavior, we discuss the sources of issue ownership and mainly its relationship to the news media. To make this more concrete, we take a look into the Flemish situation and how issue ownership evolved in this region. Afterwards we discuss the financial crisis. What was the financial crisis and why do we see this as an independent issue? How does it differ from the other, more traditional issues?

With this theoretical insight, we then turn to our own research where we try to unravel the relationship between the news media and associative issue ownership of the financial crisis. We draw on a dataset of survey interviews held with more than one thousand Flemings and a content analysis of two major Flemish newspapers ("De Standaard" & "Het Laatste Nieuws") in 2009. In our research we first examine what political party owned the issue "financial crisis" in the months preceding the 2009 Flemish elections. Next, we turn to the role of the news media in shaping this ownership. We see this one case study of the financial crisis as a pilot project and hopefully a potential basis to assess many other newly emerging issues in different regions and time spans. In future research, we hope to come to a clear view on generalizable characteristics determining the ownership of new issues and their electoral consequences.

1 Theoretical exploration

1.1 Issue ownership

1.1.1 Explaining issue ownership

The issue ownership theory is based on the relationship in the public mind between political parties and issues. This relationship can be a mere association between a party and an issue or it can be an evaluation of how a party performed on a specific issue (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011). Some scholars believe that the relationship in the public mind between issues and political parties can have electoral consequences (Bélanger & Meguid, 2005; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Van der Brug, 2004; Budge & Farlie, 1983).

Issues can be around all kinds of policy and public topics and problems such as taxes, environment, unemployment, immigration, social policy, etc. In this section, we try to explain the issue ownership theory. We describe its origin and disentangle the variety on definitions and interpretations. Finally, we come to our own conceptualization of issue ownership that will serve as a basis for our research.

The origin of the theory

The origin of issue ownership can be traced back to Stokes (1963) who argued voters simply react to the association of political parties with some goal, state or symbol that they value positively or negatively. Stokes distinguishes two types of issues: position and valence issues. Position issues are positively or negatively valued by the electorate and political parties pursue different goals within these issues. For valence issues, the goals of the different parties are the same but different alternatives exist to accomplish them, based on different ideological viewpoints (Stokes, 1963, p. 373-374; Van den Brug, 2004, p. 211; Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011). An example of a valence issue is “corruption”, all parties will claim to be against corruption. “Taxes” is a typical position issue, some parties want more taxes, and others want less.

With his view on issues determining the voter’s choice, Stokes laid the foundation of a concept that Budge & Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996) later called “issue ownership”. According to Petrocik (1996), every political party has a handling reputation for all possible issues. Handling is seen as “*the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters.*” For example, the Democratic Party in the US has a good reputation for its accomplishments in social policy and the Republicans stand strong in the issue of “taxes”.

According to Petrocik the critical difference among elections are the problem concerns of the voters. When a specific problem is high on the issue agenda of the public, it will benefit the party who has the best handling reputation or is conceived as the issue owner. Petrocik sees the issue handling reputation of political parties as being virtually a constant. The campaigns of political parties are, therefore, ideally pointed at increasing the saliency of issues in which they stand strong, rather than trying to claim ownership over a new issue (1996, p. 826). Similar to Stokes, Petrocik distinguished two types of issues. The first types are “party constituency” issues. The ownership of this type of issue is long-term, not easily changed because of its “stable foundations and link with social structure”. Social security and taxes are contemporary examples of such issues. A second type are “performance issues”. Performance issues are problems that can happen at any time and that the government has to deal with, such as, wars, inflation and unemployment. The voter will evaluate the incumbent based on its performance regarding those issues. Petrocik points out that the ownership of performance issues is short-term and less stable compared to the ownership of party constituency issues (1996, p. 827).

The two dimensions of issue ownership

Petrocik and Stokes both distinguish two types of issues, but they have a different view on issue ownership itself. Stokes speaks of an “association” between parties and issues, Petrocik of a “handling reputation”. Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011) disentangled these two dimensions of issue ownership into an associative and a competence dimension. They believe current conceptualizations and measurements of issue ownership suffer from several shortcomings:

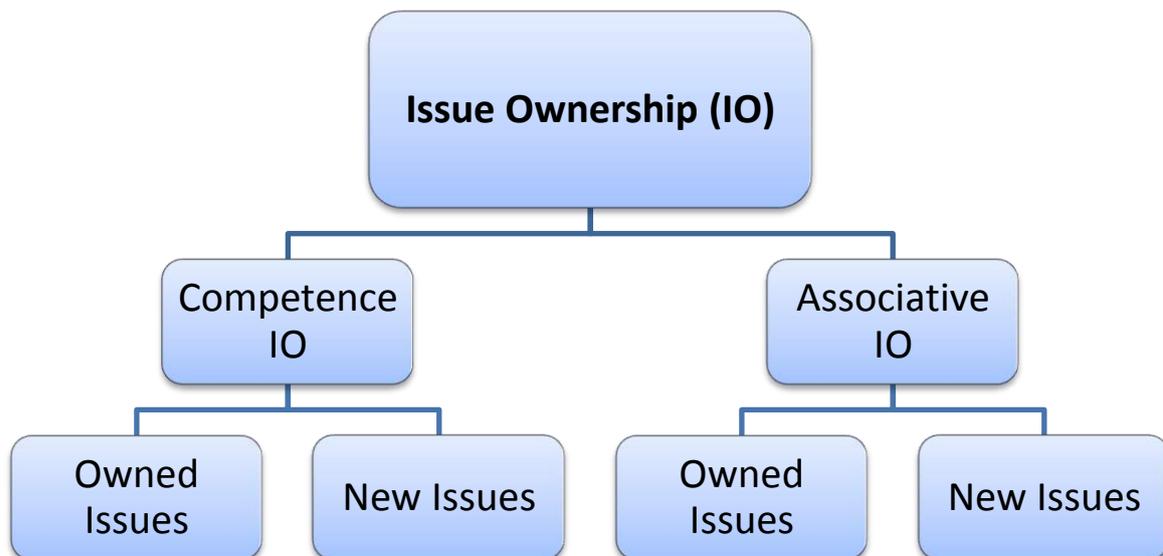
“Existing measurements do not grasp this multidimensionality, but only tap what we call the ‘competence’ dimension of issue ownership: whether parties are considered to be the ‘best’ to deal with an issue (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011, p. 3).”

They argue current definitions of issue ownership are vague and can be separated in two related, but analytically independent dimensions: a competence and an associative dimension. The competence dimension grasps what parties are best in ‘handling’ certain issues. Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011) point out that this competence dimension of issue ownership is strongly affected by party preference, which makes it a problematic concept to explain voting behavior. Moreover, they argue that voters think about a specific party when they think about a particular issue, regardless of whether or not the voter considers this party as the most competent to deal with that issue. They therefore plea future research to stress the associative dimension of issue ownership: *“An associative link between certain issues and parties in the minds of the voters (p. 3).”*

Issue ownership untangled

We agree with Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011) and plea for the associative dimension of issue ownership. Moreover, we believe the two types of ownership proposed by Petrocik (1996) do not apply to the associative dimension of issue ownership. Considering the associations the public makes between an issue and a political party, we think there is no point in making a division between performance and party constituency ownership because competence is not necessarily a criterion to link a party and an issue. The public may associate a political party with an issue even if it has a bad handling reputation. When an incumbent fails to cope with a major political crisis, the public will probably still associate the crisis with the incumbent, regardless of its performance. We therefore plea for another distinction in associative issue ownership, between owned and non-owned or new political issues. Another reason we do not adopt the distinction between performance and party constituency ownership is the fact that they strongly coincide. For example, an issue like social security can be seen both as a performance and as a party constituency issue. When a president reforms social security, will his party claim or lose ownership of this issue based on how he handles this reform *or* is this ownership already anchored in social networks and political cleavages? Because performance and party constituency ownership strongly coincide and this division is of no relevance for associative issue ownership, we plea future research to stress the simple division between new and owned issues. In Graph 1 we give a visual illustration of our proposal (IO=Issue Ownership).

Graph 1: Graphic illustration of Issue Ownership



We choose this distinction because we believe whether an issue is new or not, is the most important criterion to determine to what extent an issue can be claimed by a political party. For new political issues, we can assume it is unclaimed by any political party because of its new nature. For owned issues, the ownership is assumed to be more or less stable. Or as Petrocik (1996) stated:

“The critical constants are the issue handling reputations of the parties...Perceptions of a party’s issue competence probably change very slowly, when they change at all (p. 826).”

As empirically proved by Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011, p. 23), we assume associative issue ownership to be even more stable than the competence variant of Petrocik. Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011) refer to the classic accounts (Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge, 1994; Petrocik, 1996) who state issue ownership to be essentially stable, except for the non-owned or new issues.

Based on these theoretical reflections, we choose the distinction between new and owned issues regarding associative issue ownership. In our research, the financial crisis will serve as an example of a new issue. Before turning to our research, we discuss the relevance of issue ownership in relationship to voting behavior, its sources and conclude with an overview of issue ownership in Flanders.

1.1.2 Issue ownership and voting behavior

“As people identify less with parties and as their ideological links with parties are withering, they increasingly rely on issues as electoral beacons (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).”

To point at the significance of issue ownership, we briefly discuss the relevance of the theory in explaining voting behavior. We give an overview of different findings and studies and relate this to our own research.

Budge & Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996) were the first to examine the effects of issue ownership on voting behavior. They revealed that election results can, to a large extent, be explained by the salience of issues during the elections campaign. Budge & Farlie (1983) showed for several Western democracies that parties who held a strong competence reputation on issues that were high on the public’s agenda, systematically won the elections. According to their theory of issue ownership, parties and their candidates consequently try to emphasize issues on which they have a strong reputation in order to gain an electoral advantage. Other scholars followed in the footsteps of Budge & Farlie and Petrocik, using an issue ownership perspective to explain voting behavior.

Bélanger & Meguid (2005), for example, studied voting behavior of the 1997 and 2000 Canadian elections. They stress the importance of issue saliency as a mediating factor in the voter's choice. Moreover, they demonstrate that a party's competence to handle an issue can only influence voting behavior, when the issue is considered important by the public.

Green & Hobolt (2008) applied the issue ownership theory in explaining voting behavior in the 2005 British general election. They argue that the issue ownership theory of party competition provides a better explanation of the voter's choice than the spatial proximity model of Downs. In this model, both voters and parties are presented in an imaginary policy space. Every voter has an optimal position in relation to the different political parties, based on his policy preferences. According to Downs, someone casts his vote on the party, which is the closest to its own position in this policy space (Klingemann et al., 1994; Van der Brug, 2004).

Van der Brug (2004) defends a more indirect effect of the issue priorities of voters on their party choice. He showed that the issue priorities of voters contribute little to their party choice. Unlike Green & Hobolt, he argues party identification and left/right distances are better predictors of party preference, supporting the Downsian model of voting behavior. Van der Brug (2004, p. 224-226) believes the information costs would become unrealistically high for most citizens if they had to take into account all of the priorities given to specific issues by the different parties.

The preceding studies all handled the competence dimension of issue ownership. Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011), were the first scholars to examine the voting effects of the associative dimension of issue ownership in a multiparty electoral system. They argue that associative issue ownership affects voting because it triggers accessibility: *"When people deem an issue to be important, they spontaneously think about the party associated with the issue; this makes that party accessible and top of mind when a voting decision has to be taken (p. 23)."*

The findings of Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch suggest competence issue ownership is a stronger predictor of voting than the associative dimension. Consequently, the handling reputation of a party over an issue matters more than whether it gets associated with it by the public. Despite the weaker effect compared to competence issue ownership, Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch demonstrated associative issue ownership does also have a significant effect on the voting preferences of the public.

As Bélanger & Meguid demonstrated for competence issue ownership, Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch show the salience of issues is an important mediating factor: “*When people consider an issue to be important and when they associate that issue with a party, chances increase that they will vote for that party* (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011, p. 21).”

Despite the stronger relationship between competence issue ownership and the voters choice, Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011, p. 21-24) show the associative dimension is less related to party preference than the competence dimension. Consequently, associative issue ownership is a more independent concept and predictor of voting behavior.

We conclude that the issue ownership theory gives an important explanation for voting behavior complementary to the Downsian model. Not only party identification and ideological distance matter in explaining the voter’s choice. Which issues are high on the public agenda and what party gets associated with those issues are important determinants in understanding how voters cast their ballots. The competence dimension of issue ownership is a better predictor, but is stronger related to other voting determinants like party preference. The associative dimension of issue ownership thus provides a more independent and unambiguous variable to explain voting behavior next to other traditional predictors. This conclusion provides additional arguments to concentrate our research on the associative dimension of issue ownership.

1.1.3 The sources of issue ownership

As we have seen, issue ownership is an important predictor of voting behavior, but where does it come from? Why do people associate an issue with a specific political party? In literature, we found only a few scholars who tried to discover the sources of issue ownership, all of them concentrating on its competence dimension.

As we have explained, Petrocik (1996, p. 827) distinguishes two types of issue ownership, performance and constituency issue ownership, with each their own sources. Petrocik believes performance issues to be a result of *the record of the incumbent*. The record of the incumbent refers to how the public perceives the governing party to have handled a certain issue in the past, which results in a handling reputation. When the governing party is conceived as being able to handle an issue, this results in a strong handling reputation and the ownership of this issue. According to Petrocik, ownership that is based on the record of the incumbent is called performance issue ownership. Constituency issue ownership is not seen as the result of the record of the incumbent but of *the constituencies of political parties*.

This means political parties are associated with different issues according to the groups whom the party represents in social conflicts. These conflicts can be economic, ethnic, religious, ideological, etc. Consequently, a party gets associated with the poor, the employees, the Afro Americans, the Christians, etc. A party gets identified with a constituency issue because it is rooted in deep cleavages dividing society and in the social networks these parties represent (Petrocik, 1996). Despite a thorough description of the sources of these two types of issue ownership, Petrocik nor other scholars empirically tested them.

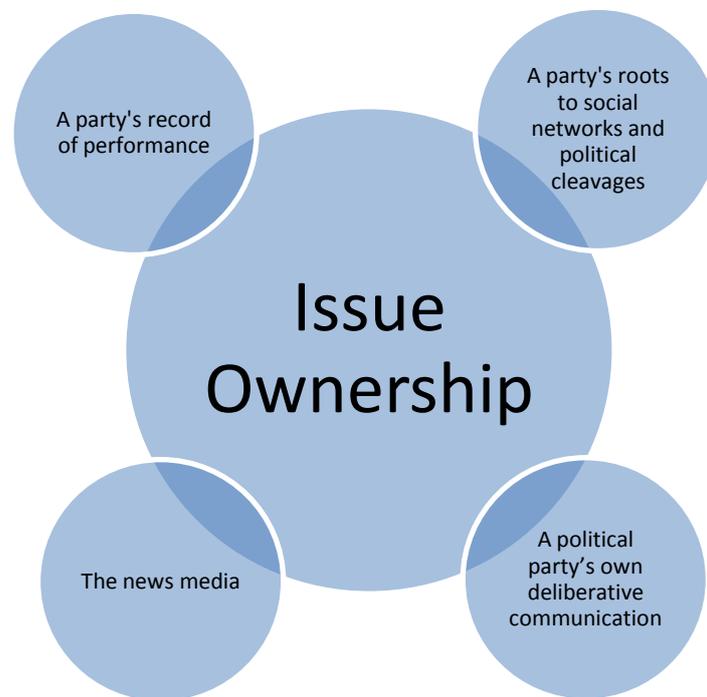
The classic authors in the domain of issue ownership (Budge & Farlie, 1984; Petrocik, 1996) stress the fact that political parties in election time will try to emphasize the issues in which they have a strong reputation in order to get an electoral advantage. They do not see party communication as a source of issue ownership, but moreover an electoral strategy to get an issue high on the public agenda. In contrast to Budge & Farlie and Petrocik, Klingemann et al. (1994) claim party communication can be a source of issue ownership. They argue political parties can claim, enforce or lose ownership over an issue, depending on their own communication. Klingemann et al. believe a political party can master its ownership over issues by advertising, making electoral programs, speeches etc. (Klingemann et al., 1994; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

Walgrave & De Swert (2007) were the first to empirically test where issue ownership comes from. They specifically examined whether issue ownership is created and maintained through a party's own deliberative communication and by the coverage of the news media in Belgium. By bringing in the mass media, they propose a new potential source of issue ownership. Their empirical findings suggest that:

“Both a party's own communication as well as the news media, linking parties and issues in their daily coverage, significantly and independently of each other, affect issue ownership to more or less the same extent (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007, p. 65).”

They show party communication influences issue ownership in the long run and coverage of news media has a more immediate effect on the perceptions of the public. Based on these findings and the discussed literature we can distinguish four sources of issue ownership as portrayed in the subsequent graph: a party's record of performance, a party's roots to social networks and political cleavages, the news media and a political party's own deliberative communication. One of the three sources (a party's roots to social networks and political cleavages) is stable, the other are volatile and thus open to change. Only two of the four sources were empirically tested and verified, being the communication of a political party and the news media, the others remain untested.

Graph 2: The sources of issue ownership



All the described sources of issue ownership refer to its competence dimension. In our research, we will examine the sources of associative issue ownership in Flanders. We concentrate specifically on the role of the news media because we believe they play a crucial role in assigning ownership of *new* issues to political parties in contrast to their role in the ownership of already claimed issues.

1.1.4 Issue ownership and the news media

Considering the sources of issue ownership, we are specifically interested in the role of the news media. As we have seen, the saliency of an issue is an important variable that affects the importance towards voting behavior. The more salient, the more important the issue will be in determining the voter's choice (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Van der Brug, 2004; Bélanger & Meguid, 2005). In developing their agenda-setting theory, McCombs & Shaw showed (1972) for the small American town "Chapel Hill" that the saliency of issues in the news media was very similar to the saliency of issues in the public mind. Later Iyengar & Kinder (1987) gave additional proof of the causality of this relationship and showed that the more extensive the news media coverage, the more salient or accessible the issue was to the public. In their theory of priming, the authors state that the public draws on the saliency of issues as presented in news media coverage when evaluating political parties. Therefore, political parties will try to gain media attention on salient issues. However, this media attention is only helpful for issues on which the party has a favorable reputation. The party that is considered more competent on the salient issues is more able to take advantage of news coverage about those issues (Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 1994).

This means there is a transfer of saliency of issues from the news media towards the public, but is the same true for issue ownership? Is there a transfer of issue ownership from the news media towards the public? Walgrave & De Swert (2007) showed issue ownership is created and maintained by the coverage of news media. They gave proof that the news media systematically link issues with political parties and that this link significantly affected issue ownership within the mind of the Belgian public. They state news media can include other possible sources of issue ownership such as speeches and advertisements of political parties. In that way the news media do not have to be seen as an actor on itself, but more as a channel of information and political party communication.

Walgrave Lefevere & Nuytemans (2009) gave additional proof of the causal relationship between news media and issue ownership by performing an experiment. They exposed over 5,000 respondents to fake news items and checked for changes in their perception of issue ownership. The authors found news media exposure leads to significant shifts in issue ownership. Particularly on issues that were not owned by any party, a communicative performance by a party leader in such a fake news item made a difference. These findings inspired us to study issue ownership of the financial crisis and the effects of the news media on the ownership of this new issue. In our research, we will quantitatively examine these effects and compare them with other issues.

1.1.5 Issue ownership in Flanders

Now that we have explained issue ownership, its relation to voting behavior and its sources, we can clarify how issue ownership evolved in Flanders. Before we explain our own research, we explore the territory where we performed it. This makes it possible to evaluate the results of the research within its context.

Flanders is a partly independent region of the federal state Belgium. It has its own parliament and government responsible for territorial and cultural matters. Some of the competences such as finance, foreign affairs and justice are still governed at the federal level. Flemings, who do not live in Brussels, cannot vote for the French speaking political parties and vice versa. Brussels is an exception with both Flemish and French speaking parties. This situation creates an electoral division between the French and Flemish speaking Belgians. When we study voting behavior or issue ownership, we cannot treat all Belgians alike, simply because they cannot vote for the same parties. In our research, we will be studying the effect of news media on associative issue ownership in Flanders. We only take regard of the Flemish political parties in Flanders and with what issues they got associated.

For one and a half century, we could distinguish three cleavages dividing Belgium. Society was divided on religious, socio-economic and cultural issues. After World War II, these traditional cleavages faded, while other new cleavages such as materialism versus post materialism came to dominate the political landscape. Furthermore, the Belgian society knew a strong “verzuiling” or pillarisation. The organization of social life was built upon strongly divided networks that influenced every aspect of daily life. As of the fifties, these networks started to fall apart. The Belgians call this evolution “ontzuiling” or depillarisation; the pillars in which society was organized were falling apart. Due to this evolution, the voting behavior of all Belgians got reprogrammed. Political parties evolved towards mass or “catch all” parties (Boucké, 2004, p. 79-81).

According to Deschouwer (2004), the electoral stability in Belgium came to an end in 1965, mostly because of the starting regionalization of the political parties in Flanders and Wallonia. In 1972 and 1978, the three biggest political parties in Belgium were divided in French and Flemish speaking parts. Since 1980, the electoral system is completely divided between Flemish and French speaking parties, where Flemish can only vote for Flemish parties, with the exception for the capital Brussels. The new reforms and electoral evolutions in Belgium brought strong volatility, complexity and fragmentation of voting behavior (Deschouwer, 2004, p. 179).

The voter no longer cast his vote for the party which newspapers he was reading or which union he was associated with. The voter was on his own. As such, the news media came to fulfill an important role in opinion formation for the Flemish voters. Today the issues the news media put forward can make the difference between winning and losing the elections (Bélanger, 2005, p. 3).

Research of Walgrave & De Swert (2007, p. 64) showed issue ownership plays an important role in Flanders. Political parties claim and voters believe that certain parties are better in handling specific issues than others. Next to the competence dimension of issue ownership mentioned here, the associative dimension plays at least an equally important role in understanding voting behavior in Flanders. As stated before, Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2011) showed the relevance of associative issue ownership and its predictive value of the voter's choice in Belgium. The media in Flanders systematically associate certain issues with political parties. New parties such as the ecologic "Groen!" and the extreme rightist party "Vlaams Belang" have a more one-sided profile than traditional parties (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007, p. 64). Traditional parties like the Christian democratic "CD&V" and social democratic "sp.a" have a less pronounced and more central profile. sp.a is mainly identified with social issues. According to the Flemish voter, CD&V is best in handling issues such as education and family. Furthermore, we can conclude from the research of Walgrave & De Swert (2007, p. 57-58) that the liberal democratic "Open Vld" is generally seen as strong in handling issues around economics and taxes.

Until now, we have given a brief overview of the electoral landscape and issue ownership in Flanders. We found certain political parties are systematically seen as being better in handling certain issues and news media enforce the link of political parties with certain issues. Issue ownership with both the competence as the associative dimension, plays an important role in explaining voting behavior in Flanders.

1.2 The financial crisis

After the explanation of issue ownership, we now turn to an issue in which we are specifically interested: “the financial crisis”. We give extra attention to this issue because of its new and therefore unclaimed nature. We believe the ownership of a new issue to be strongly influenced by the news media, greater than for other issues. In our research, we will examine this statement in Flanders. We first give a brief introduction to the financial crisis and then argue why we see it as a new political issue.

1.2.1 A brief introduction to the financial crisis of 2007-2009

The financial crisis of 2007-2009 is considered the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. There are many names circulating who refer to the recent financial crisis, such as the economic crisis, the great recession, the subprime crisis, the credit crisis, etc. The economic or financial crisis was actually a sequence of different crises, which were all directly related to each other. Much academic work is devoted to its causes, but most economists contend it was initiated by the collapse of the American house and mortgages market and liquidity shortfall in the United States banking system (Unger, 2009). Next to extensive defaults by subprime borrowers in the mortgage markets Unger also points out a poor monetary policy by the Federal Reserve, irresponsible behavior of banks, its managers and rating agencies, as contributing causes of the financial crisis.

Although there were many different causes, the crisis was initially triggered by the growing threat of extensive defaults by subprime borrowers in the mortgage markets, which was called the subprime, credit or mortgage crisis (Longstaff, 2008). The home loans were repackaged and sold to other banks all over the world. Since many of the borrowers could not pay off their loan, the value of the repackaged mortgages fell to a minimum. Since it was not clear what banks had bought those assets, interbank traffic dried out which led to a banking crisis. Banks would not loan any money to each other anymore. Consequently, many banks came to have liquidity problems combined with a swift fall of their stock prices. This resulted in the collapse of large financial institutions, the bankruptcy of banks, the nationalization and bailout of banks by national governments such as Fortis in Belgium (Raaij, 2009).

The subprime and banking crisis led to a great decline of investor confidence in stock market and economic prospects leading to a dramatic collapse of stock markets around the world. Consumers were afraid of losing income or their jobs. Consequently, they avoided new purchases such as cars and houses, which again led to the failure of many companies and a significant decline in economic activity (Raaij, 2009). The subprime and banking crisis combined with the decline of investor and consumer trust led to a severe global economic recession in 2008. Although there have been aftershocks, the financial crisis itself is believed to have ended sometime between late 2008 and mid 2009 (Time Magazine, 2009). When we speak of the financial crisis, we refer to the sequence of crisis and banking troubles and the economic recession they led to.

Next to the severe economic consequences, the financial crisis grew to be a huge political issue and media storm. In Belgium, Fortis Bank almost went bankrupt and capital injections were needed for other large banks such as Dexia and KBC (The Telegraph, 2008). After the Fortis bailout, there had been much commotion concerning a violation of the separation of powers. The Prime Minister of Belgium, Yves Leterme, was suspected to have influenced a judicial decision regarding the acquisition of Fortis by BNP-Paribas. This led to the resignation of Leterme and the fall of the Belgian government (BBC News, 2008).

We conclude the financial crisis consisted out of a series of crises, which led to a decline of consumer and investor trust and eventually to an economic crisis. Despite economic consequences, there were several direct and indirect political consequences for Belgium and Flanders, including the fall of the federal government.

1.2.2 The financial crisis as a new political issue

The financial crisis had a major impact on the economic and political atmosphere worldwide. But can we see it as a new and independent political issue? Can we compare it with other traditional issues? In this section, we evaluate these questions, drawing on previous definitions from literature.

Can we see the financial crisis as a political issue?

In his systems theory David Easton (1957) makes the distinction between issues and demands. He states some demands will transform into political issues, but not all of them: *“Many demands die at birth or linger on with the support of an insignificant fraction of the society and are never raised to the level of possible political discussion (Easton, 1957, p. 389).”* Easton defines an issue as: *“a demand that the members of a political system are prepared to deal with as a significant item for discussion through the recognized channels in the system (p. 389).”*

For Easton, the key criterion for a demand to become an issue is that it is raised by political officials in the traditional political institutions such as the parliament and the government. Based on the criterion proposed by Easton we can easily state that the financial crisis was a political issue in Belgium and Flanders. The Belgian government discussed specific legislation and measures to cope with the financial crisis as demanded by different actors. For example, the Belgian government gave employers the possibility to adapt the working hours of their labor force and put employees in temporary unemployment as a measurement to cope with the financial crisis (FOD-WASO, 2010). This was an explicit demand of the social partners that was discussed in a recognized channel of the system. We therefore can state that the financial crisis meets the criteria of a political issue proposed by Easton, because it was explicitly raised in government and parliamentary discussions in Belgium.

Budge complements the definition of Easton by adding a second criterion: "Importance among electors". Budge (1993) defines issues as "*topics raised by one or more party leaderships and/or important among electors.*" According to Budge, the definition one applies for issues can vary according to its research purposes and the consulted sources. He distinguishes four possible sources to track issues: election surveys, the news media, political party documents and legislative sources and proceedings. The most common source are election surveys where the public is asked what issues they find important. A possible pitfall is that the researcher only asks about issues of the previous years, not taking into account issues that may be specifically prominent in the current election (1993, p. 44).

To determine whether the electorate in Flanders saw the financial crisis as an *important* issue in election time in Flanders, we will consult the public as a source. We will draw on a survey where the Flemish public was asked how important the financial crisis would be in determining their vote and compare this with the assigned importance to other issues. If the financial crisis is seen by the public as important, we conclude it can be seen as an issue or as Budge put it "*a topic important in defining party support among electors and in moving support between the parties* (1993, p. 43)."

Some might argue that the financial crisis is rather an event than an issue, not comparable with the other traditional issues. We can either call it a "political event", but as we see it, every *new* issue starts off being an event. Some disappear and others stay and become recurring themes embedded in social networks. Another possible criticism is that the financial crisis is more a subtopic of the issue "economic performance".

Whether the financial crisis strongly coincides or can be seen as a subtopic of “economic policy” may be so, but so can taxes and unemployment. Despite these issues being so strongly related to the economy, they were always studied as independent issues and traditionally have other issue owners (see Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Petrocik et al., 2003). Furthermore, the consequences of the financial crisis did not only affect the economic policy, but touched every realm of the public sphere. The most logical and objective criterion in a democracy is to define something as an issue based on its saliency with the public. When the public deems a topic important then it is eligible to invoke political debate and become an issue. To strengthen this point, we will empirically assess whether the financial crisis can be seen as an independent issue, separate from the issue “economic policy”.

*Can we see the financial crisis as a **new** political issue?*

We may find empirical arguments that the financial crisis can be seen as an independent issue, but was it a *new* issue? Some may rightfully argue financial crisis is a recurring phenomenon throughout human history. However, we and many economists with us believe the crisis of 2007-2009 was of a nature we have not seen since the Great Depression of the thirties. It was a crisis that, next to the economy, affected every realm of the public sphere (Mah-Hui, 2008). Secondly, the financial crisis was unexpected, in contrary to already claimed issues. Other issues like taxes, social policy, environment and immigration can somewhat be foreseen by political parties and the news media.

Before the financial crisis broke out, there could not have been deliberative actions from political parties to claim this issue, simply because it was not an issue yet and no one knew it would become one. When we look at the financial crisis from the view of competence issue ownership, it can undoubtedly be defined as a performance issue. When measuring associative issue ownership, performance is not a criterion. The public is simply asked what political party they associate with the issue, in our case the financial crisis. When the government performance is poor, people will probably still associate the financial crisis with the incumbent. We therefore hypothesize that the financial crisis was associated by the public with the Flemish governing parties.

When determining the sources of associative issue ownership the division between performance issues and party constituency issues does not give much added value because an association in contrary to a good handling reputation does not depend on government performance. Examples of performance issues are unemployment, inflation, wars, domestic and foreign policy (Petrocik, 1996). Some of these issues such as “a war” can be seen as new and unexpected. Other issues are frequently recurring and consequently already owned by a political party such as “unemployment”. As we already pointed out, it is crucial to look at new issues when studying the sources of issue ownership. Other issues were already claimed in the past, which makes it very difficult to detect the sources that lay beneath that claim and the role of the news media. Examining the claim of an issue shortly after its emergence, gives the opportunity to untangle the sources that led to that claim. We believe a study of the sources of the ownership of the financial crisis, gives us this opportunity.

We do not claim that a new issue emerges in a vacuum. When a new issue emerges, the public interprets it in terms of already existing predispositions. The financial crisis may be associated with a political party that owns other issues such as unemployment, taxes, economy policy, etc. However, apart from the already existing predispositions, we believe that we can distinguish the influence the news media has had on issue ownership of the financial crisis and compare this with other issues.

2 Research

2.1 Research design

Now that we theoretically explored the phenomenon of issue ownership, we can focus on our own research. Our main objective is to determine the sources of associative issue ownership of the financial crisis with a focus on the role of the news media. Henceforth, we will refer to issue ownership as its associative variant defined earlier. The main research questions we propose are:

- Q1: What political party became the issue owner of the financial crisis?
- Q2: Were news media key sources in determining issue ownership of the financial crisis?
- Q3: Is there a difference in news media influence between the financial crisis and already claimed issues?

To answer these questions we draw on a large-scale survey of about 1,200 Flemings who were repeatedly questioned during the four months before the Flemish elections in June 2009, a period that coincides with the end of the financial crisis. The sample (n=4,831) for this survey was randomly drawn from the National Register of Belgium. Afterwards, trained interviewers of the research company “TNS Dimarso” visited and questioned the selected respondents. The response rate was about 50% (n=2,331) in the first wave of the survey (TNS Media, 2009). For our analysis, we only selected the Flemish respondents.

Next to the survey data, we base our research on a large content analysis of two major Flemish newspapers: “De Standaard” and “Het Laatste Nieuws”. De Standaard is known as a Flemish quality newspaper and Het Laatste Nieuws is the most popular tabloid in Flanders (CIM, 2010). These newspapers were coded on mentioned issues. The coding was done by four Flemish coders. Determining inter coder reliability for the issues, proved to be a bit problematic. For some issues the inter coder reliability could not be calculated because not all issues were double coded. Nevertheless, for the other issues the results were satisfying. The agreement between the coders was never below 90 per cent, and for almost all issues Krippendorff’s α scores were 0.7 or higher. We ourselves were not involved in the data collection process and are grateful to Dr. Jonas Lefevere who provided us with this data and its additional information.

Based on these datasets we will first examine whether the financial crisis can be seen as an issue according to the criterion and sources formulated by Budge (1993). We examine whether the financial crisis was seen as important by the Flemish electorate. Next, we look which political party actually was the issue owner of the financial crisis in Flanders. We hypothesize the financial crisis will be associated with the Flemish political parties in office because they were responsible for coping with the financial crisis at the time of the survey:

- H1: The Flemish public associated the financial crisis with the Flemish political parties in the federal government.
- H2A: There is a strong similarity between what political parties the Flemish public and the news media associated with the financial crisis.
- H2B: This relationship is stronger compared to other “owned” issues.
- H3: News media exposure increased the probability that someone could associate a political party with the financial crisis.
- H4: News media exposure increased the probability that someone associated the financial crisis with its issue owner.

To test the first hypothesis we turn to the survey data. The respondents were asked what party they associated with the financial crisis. We analyze the responses and assess whether the governing parties were for the most part associated with the financial crisis by the Flemish public.

Once we know who claimed the ownership of the financial crisis, we can determine the dynamics that lay beneath that claim. Why did the public associate the financial crisis with its issue owner? We hypothesize the news media to be an important source and to have more influence on issue ownership of the financial crisis than on already claimed issues. To test Hypothesis 2A & 2B we compare the news media with the survey data. Following the example of McCombs & Shaw (1972), we use correlations of aggregated data to express correspondence between news media and the public. We compared what political parties the public associated with the financial crisis with the political parties the news media associated with the financial crisis. We express the correspondence between the news media and the public in a Pearson's correlation coefficient. Later we calculate this degree of correspondence for other issues and compare it with the financial crisis. Doing so, we can see whether the correspondence of associative issue ownership between the public and the media is stronger for the financial crisis.

To test Hypothesis 3 & 4, we check whether exposure to news media had a significant effect on the political party with whom a member of the public associated the financial crisis. To do this, we first perform a simple binary analysis based on the survey data to check whether exposure to news media is related to the political parties with whom someone associates the financial crisis. Afterwards, we check for intervening variables in binary logistic regressions. Using these binary regressions, we first examine whether the news media affected the ability of the Flemish public to associate any political party at all with the financial crisis and compare this with other issues.

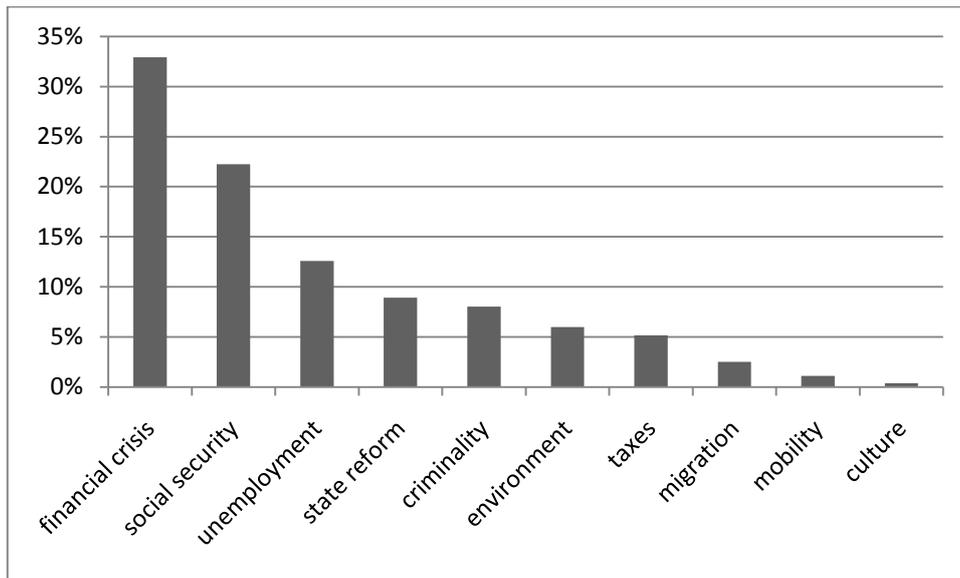
Then we use a binary logistic regression to examine whether exposure to news media enhanced issue ownership of the financial crisis in the advantage of its issue owner and once again compare this with the other issues. Finally, we turn to the effects of associative issue ownership on voting behavior where we briefly assess whether the people who associated the financial crisis with its issue owners were also more inclined to vote for them. With this research design, we aim to get a clearer view on the role of the news media in shaping associative issue ownership of the financial crisis and compare this with other issues.

2.2 Can we see the financial crisis as a political issue?

One might ask himself whether the financial crisis can be seen as an issue that can be studied from an issue ownership perspective. We have already argued the financial crisis can be seen as an issue according to the criterion of Easton because it went together with important demands that were discussed in the official channels of the Belgium political system. As pointed out, Budge sees the public as a possible source to track issues. He argues issues are *“topics raised by one or more party leaderships and/or important among electors (1993, p. 43).”*

To decide whether the financial crisis can be seen as *important among electors*, we draw on survey research. From the survey data, we can conclude whether the electors believed the financial crisis was an important issue in determining their vote. As we have seen, the most important criteria to view something as a potential political issue in a democracy, is its importance to the public. The public was asked to choose which issue would be the most important to determine their vote from a set of ten issues. The results are shown in the subsequent chart:

Graph 3: What issue would be the most important in determining your vote? (n=984)



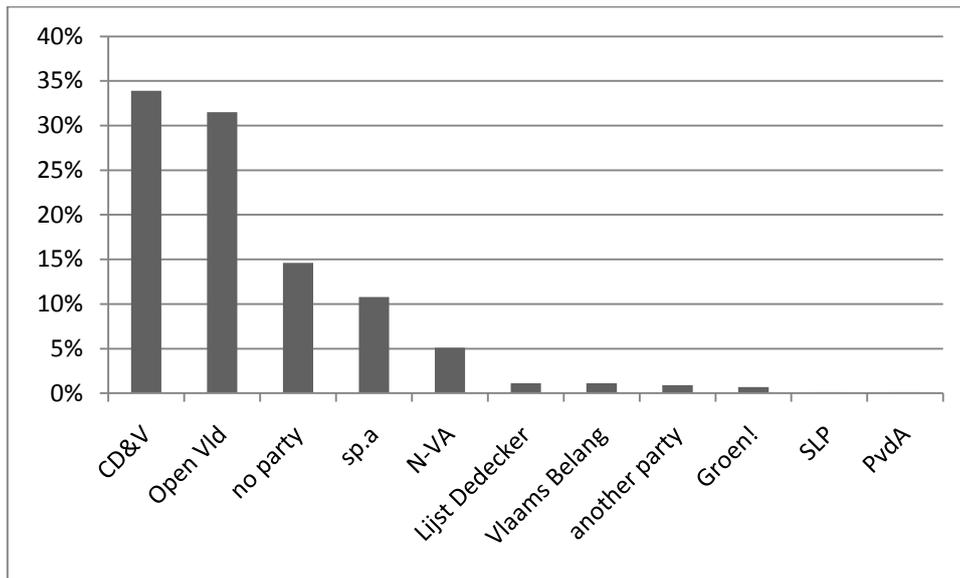
From this graph, we can clearly conclude that the financial crisis was seen by the public as an important issue. From the set of ten proposed issues, it was even seen as the most important one. Because the question was not open ended, other issues might have been more important for the public. However, from this result we can determine the financial crisis was an important issue in the mind of the public in the six months before the Flemish elections in June 2009. We conclude the financial crisis meets the requirements of an issue proposed by Easton (1957) and Budge (1993). It was discussed in official channels of the political system, important among electors and important in defining party support.

2.3 Who became the issue owner of the financial crisis?

We know the financial crisis was an important issue in Flanders in the months preceding the 2009 Flemish election, but who were the owners of this issue? We hypothesize that the public associated the financial crisis with the political parties in office. As we have said before, in terms of competence issue ownership the financial crisis can be seen as a performance issue or an issue on which the public evaluates the performance of the government. We however study associative issue ownership: *“An associative link between certain issues and parties in the minds of the voters (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2011, p. 3).”* We believe the performance is of no matter for the public to make an association. In other words, the public may associate the financial crisis with the governing parties, despite good or bad performance. This does not mean the association will have a positive effect in terms of votes. It can evolve either way. Secondly, the financial crisis was a new issue. There was no track record or handling reputation of past governments the public could rely on. As a result, the public looks in the direction of the government when this new problem or issue comes along.

We do not claim all performance issues automatically get associated with the political parties in office. Recurring performance issues like unemployment or economic policy may be linked with political parties regardless of their government participation. We do believe this to be true for *new* issues, because no government within public memory ever had to deal with that kind of problem. Other examples of new issues in the near past are the war on terror in the United States or the dioxin crisis in Belgium. Following our hypothesis, the Republican Party would have been issue owner of the war on terror and the CVP of the dioxin crisis, because those parties were in office at the time. Because the financial crisis is a new issue as well, we believe the public automatically associated it with the political parties in office. To investigate this hypothesis we draw on the survey research of the Flemish population. The respondents were asked with what political party they associate the financial crisis. Graph 4 gives an overview of the responses.

Graph 4: What political party do you associate with the financial crisis? (n=882)



From this graph, we can conclude that our first hypothesis can be confirmed. It seems the Flemish political parties in office were the issue owners of the financial crisis. Managing the financial crisis was mainly a federal responsibility, for that reason we look at the federal coalition in determining what political parties were in office at the time. In 2009, the Belgian federal government consisted of two Flemish and three French-speaking parties. The two Flemish parties in office were the liberal democratic Open Vld and Christian democratic CD&V. It is clear the public associated both Open Vld and CD&V with the financial crisis. CD&V has a small lead on Open Vld, but the difference is negligible. Other political parties such as the social democratic sp.a and nationalistic N-VA are far behind. From all respondents 65% associated the financial crisis with Open Vld or CD&V, the two Flemish parties in the federal government during the crisis. Another 14% did not associate the financial crisis with any political party. Even if we take the Flemish government at the time as a reference, our hypothesis holds true: the three most mentioned parties with whom the public associated the financial crisis were Open Vld, CD&V and sp.a, the three parties participating in the Flemish government at the time.

Next to the confirmation of our first hypothesis, Graph 4 contains another notable piece of information. It is clear most people associated the financial crisis with Open Vld or CD&V, but there is a large group of people who could not name any political party with whom they associate the financial crisis. This group contains 129 respondents or 15% of all respondents who answered the question. Later in our research, when we explain the sources of issue ownership, we will come back to this and look at some reasons why people could not associate any party with the financial crisis.

2.4 Dynamics determining the ownership of the financial crisis

Now that we know who the issue owners were, we seek to understand the dynamics or sources that lay beneath. Why did people associate the financial crisis with the political parties in office? To answer this question we turn to the sources of issue ownership. In the previous discussion of literature, we could distinguish four types of sources: the record of performance of a political party, a party's roots to social networks and political cleavages, its own deliberative communication and the news media. In our research, we are specifically interested in the role of the news media in creating associations between political parties and issues in the mind of the public. We hypothesize the news media coproduced the ownership of the financial crisis. We believe its effect was stronger for this issue compared to other issues because it was a *new* issue.

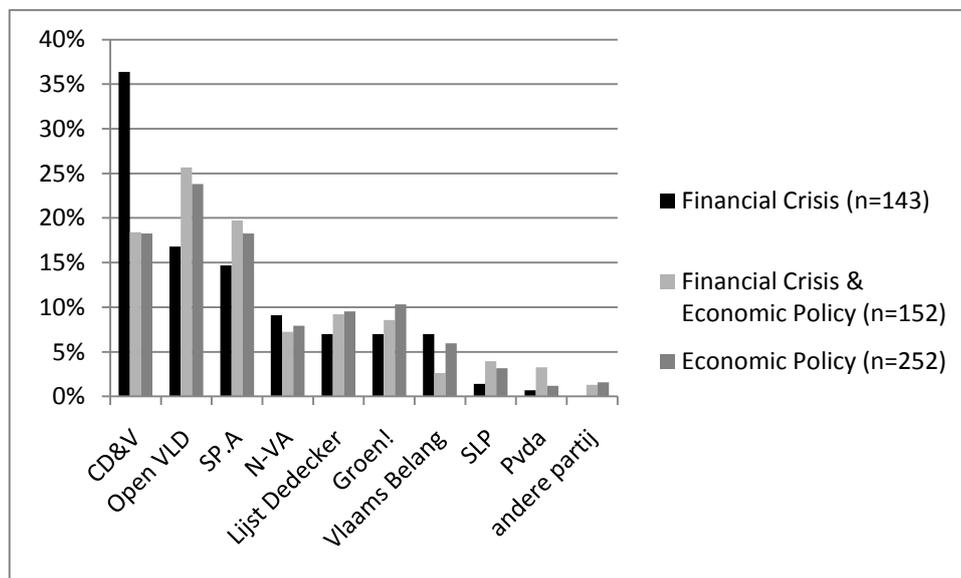
To assess whether the news media coproduced the ownership of the financial crisis issue, we will combine the content analysis and survey data. We take a look at the content of news media reporting. We explore to what extent Flemish newspapers associated the financial crisis with the same political parties as the public did and whether there is a difference compared to other traditional issues. Next, we draw on the survey research to determine whether exposure to news media had a significant effect on the ability of the public to associate the financial crisis with any political party at all. Finally, we assess whether the news media enhanced issue ownership in the advantage of the incumbent. We acknowledge that the ownership of a new issue does not arise in a vacuum, but can be affected by the ownership of other issues. Therefore, we now first evaluate to what extent the ownership of the financial crisis is related to the issue “economic policy”.

2.4.1 Did issue ownership of economic policy determined issue ownership of the financial crisis?

Some might argue the financial crisis is not an independent issue, but a subtopic of the issue “economic policy” and therefore has the same owner as this issue. We now briefly assess whether the ownership of the financial crisis was codetermined by the ownership of the issue “economic policy”. Since economic policy was not measured as a political issue in the survey research, we have to use news media data to answer this question.

Drawing on the content analysis of two major Flemish newspapers, we examined with what political parties the news media associated the issues financial crisis and economic policy. We selected all articles that mentioned the financial crisis. We did *not* select articles that also mentioned economic policy. Then, we inspected the frequency that political parties were mentioned in the selected articles. We consider every mention of a political party as an association between this party and the financial crisis. After this, we did the same for the issue “economic policy” and for the articles who mentioned both issues and came to the following result:

Graph 5: Issue associations in Flemish newspapers with the financial crisis and economic policy



We can determine from Graph 5 that the associations between political parties and the financial crisis in the news media (n=143) differ from the associations with the economic policy (n=252). The financial crisis is mainly associated with the Christian democratic CD&V and economic policy with the liberal democratic Open Vld. The associations made in articles that mentioned both issues, strongly correspond to those that only mentioned economic policy.

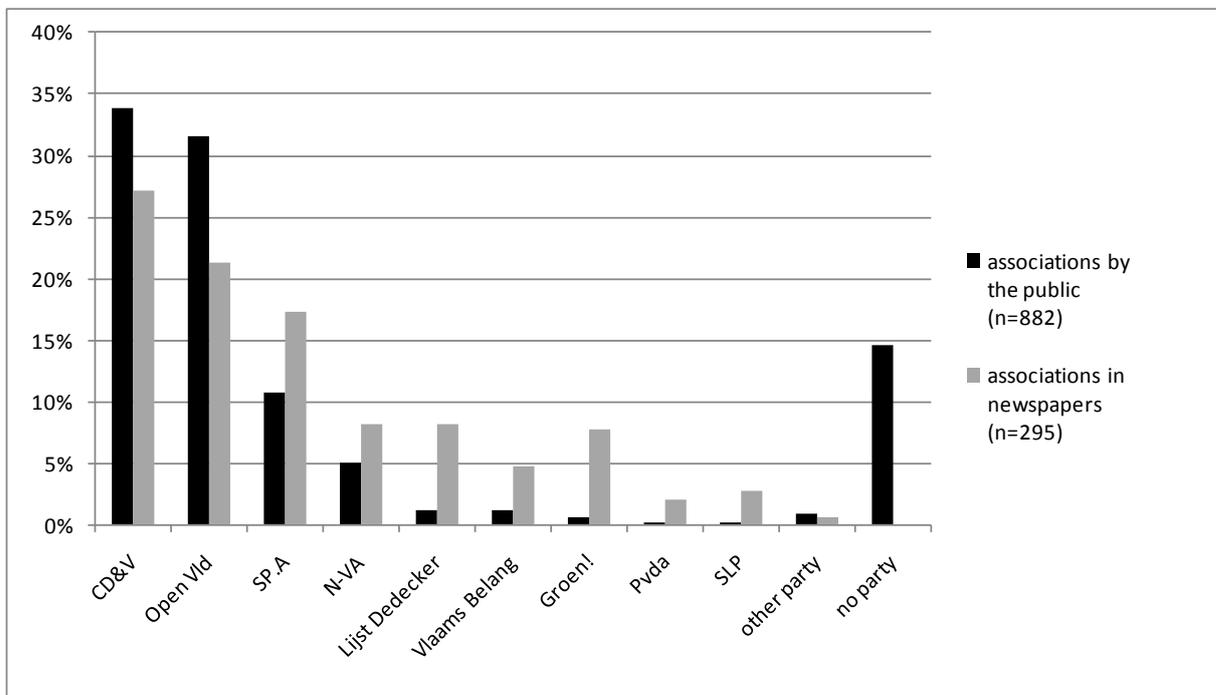
Despite differences, from the analysis of the articles mentioning both issues we must acknowledge the issue ownership of the financial crisis in the news media was strongly related to economic policy. From the 1,004 coded articles that mentioned the financial crisis, 82% also mentioned something about economic policy. The two issues were thus strongly related to each other in the news media. When we look at issue associations of the financial crisis in the news media, including its economic policy dimension, we must bear in mind that it was probably influenced by the issue ownership of economic policy, which was in the hands of Open Vld. However, from the 174 articles handling the taxes issue, 46% mentioned the economic crisis. A similar relationship could be found for the issue unemployment. Hence, the financial crisis is not the only issue that is strongly related to economic policy.

We can conclude that, despite their strong relationship, both issues had a different composition regarding issue ownership in the news media and still 18% of all the articles that mentioned the financial crisis, mentioned nothing about economic policy. Nonetheless, when we study the sources of issue ownership of the financial crisis we must bear in mind the strong relationship between the issues financial crisis and economic policy. It is more than likely that the issue ownership of the financial crisis was affected by the already existing predispositions of the public regarding economic policy and thus served as an important dynamic determining issue ownership of the financial crisis. However, we cannot give conclusive proof of this statement based on news media data. We now turn to the core of our research and try to untangle the effect of news media on issue ownership of the financial crisis.

2.4.2 Did the public associate the same political parties with the financial crisis as the news media did?

Before we look at the effects of exposure to news media, we explore its content. We want to examine whether the news media connected the same issues and political parties as the public did. We look at associations made in the news media between political parties and policy issues, more specifically associations with the financial crisis. Drawing on the data of the large-scale content analysis, we take a look at all the articles in De Standaard and Het Laatste Nieuws that handled the financial crisis in the four months before the Flemish elections in June 2009. We see every mentioning of a political party in an article about the financial crisis, as an association between that party and the financial crisis. In Graph 5 the black bars stand for the percentage of associations (n=381) made by the assessed Flemish newspapers between the financial crisis and a political party. We want to stress this analysis is different from the former news media analysis because we did not exclude the articles who mentioned economic policy *and* the financial crisis. The grey bars stand for the percentage of political parties with whom the Flemish public (n=882) associated the financial crisis. In this graph, we thus compare the associations made between political parties and the financial crisis in the newspapers with those made by the public.

Graph 6: Associations between parties and the financial crisis made by the public and the news media



The ranking of the parties is the same in the media as with the public, except for the parties Groen! and Vlaams Belang. Hence, there is a strong similarity between associative issue ownership in the news media and with the public. Despite the strong similarity, we see the associations in the news media are more equally dispersed over the different parties. This is probably due to balance mechanisms or the tendency of news media to pursue balance in their reporting of different issues (Ramsden, 1996).

To quantify the magnitude of the similarity between associative issue ownership in the news media and with the public we calculated the Pearson correlation coefficient of the proportional data displayed in Graph 6. The correlation gives an indication of the similarity of the proportional dispersion of associations between political parties and the financial crisis made by the public and newspapers. A correlation of 0.82 is very high and indicates a strong similarity. We can conclude that associations between political parties and the financial crisis made by the Flemish public and within newspapers are very similar. Consequently, we can confirm Hypothesis H2A: There is a strong similarity between what political parties the Flemish public and the news media associated with the financial crisis. We admit this high correlation is partly due to the fact we compare proportions dispersed over only eleven political parties. However, for a comparative analysis between news media data and public opinion we are obliged to base ourselves on aggregated data. The study of agenda setting effects of news media in Chapel Hill by McCombs & Shaw (1972) served as inspiration for our analysis. They calculated the correlation between the order of importance of issues with the public and the order of attributed attention to issues in the newspapers. Instead of calculating correlation between orders, we used proportions, which are more accurate.

We can now say there is a strong correspondence between issue ownership in the news media and with the public for the issue “financial crisis”, but is the financial crisis an exception? Do we see the same pattern with other issues? As already pointed out, we believe there is a stronger correlation of associative issue ownership between news media and the public for *new* issues. The media have a stronger grip on whom the public associates new issues with, because ownership is not determined yet. As we believe, the ownership of a new issue will partly emerge through news media reporting. Once the issue is claimed there is not much latitude left for the news media to change this. Consequently, we expect a stronger similarity of associative issue ownership of the financial crisis between the news media and the public compared to other owned issues.

To test Hypothesis H2B, we calculated the same correlation as we did for the financial crisis, but for a number of other *owned* issues. We can then determine whether the similarity of associative issue ownership between news media and the public is larger for the financial crisis compared to other issues.

Table 1: Correlations between issue ownership with the public and in the media

	Financial Crisis	State Reform	Taxes	Unemployment	Environement	Mobility	Social Policy	Migration
Pearson Correlation	0.82	0.70	0.66	0.65	0.64	0.61	0.59	0.45
Sig.	0.002	0.017	0.027	0.03	0.039	0.046	0.053	0.17

Table 1 gives an overview of the similarity expressed in correlations between associative issue ownership in the newspapers and with the public for eight different issues. We applied the same method to calculate these correlations as explained for the financial crisis. The strongest and most significant correlation was found for the new issue “the financial crisis”. The similarity of associative issue ownership between news media and the public is the strongest for the “financial crisis” issue. For the other issues this relationship correlates from 0.4 to 0.7, but the financial crisis stands alone with a correlation of 0.82. As a result, we can confirm hypothesis H2B. We believe this table gives a clear indication of the particularity of the financial crisis compared to other issues. There is a stronger similarity between the news media and the public in associating the financial crisis with political parties compared to other issues. The financial crisis as an issue thus differs from traditional issues. We believe it differs because of its *new* nature. The other issues are recurring themes that frequently come back, emerge in public debate and are thus contributed and associated with specific parties. Another characteristic could be that compared to the other issues, this issue concerns *crisis*. To get disclosure of this, we have to perform more research within this field and compare these findings with issue ownership of other new issues who emerge in public debate.

We conclude Flemish newspapers did associate the same political parties with the financial crisis as the public did in the months preceding the 2009 Flemish elections. This relationship is stronger compared to other traditional issues. We know there was great similarity between which parties the newspapers and the public associated with the financial crisis, but this does not prove news media had an effect on which political parties the public associated with the financial crisis. Moreover, we used aggregated data to look at associative issue ownership of the financial crisis and its relationship with the news media. To get a better idea of the *effects* of news media on an individual level, we will therefore check for the effects of news media exposure on associative issue ownership.

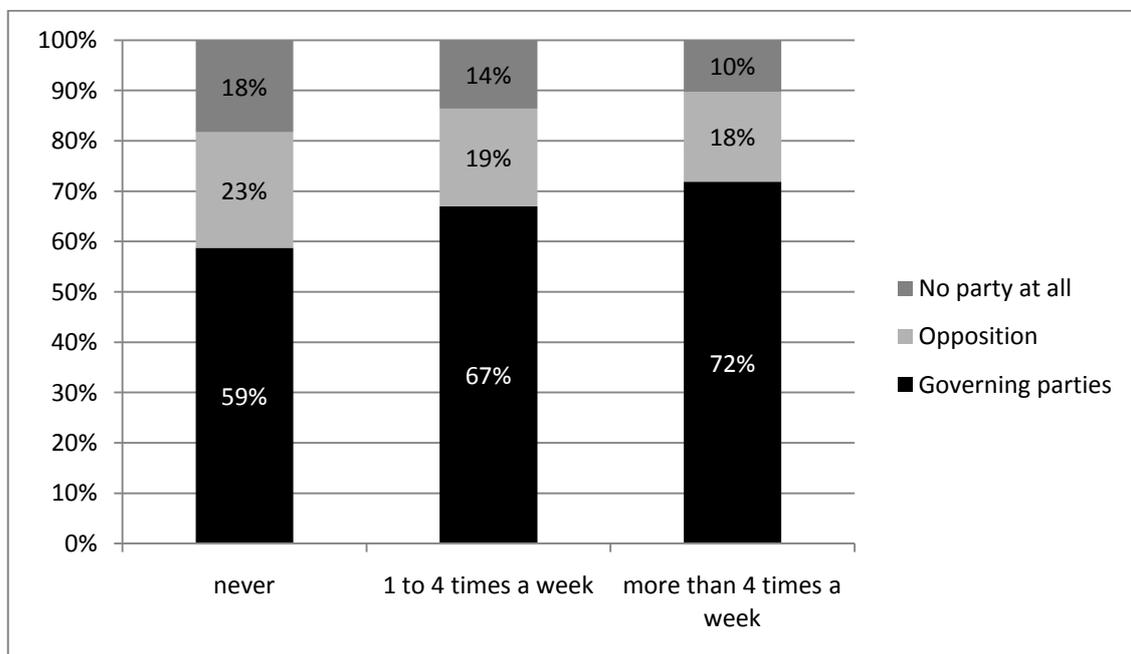
2.4.3 Were news media key sources in determining issue ownership of the financial crisis?

There may be a strong similarity between associative issue ownership of the financial crisis and the news media, but were people who got exposed to news media also more inclined to associate the financial crisis with its issue owners, the Flemish governing parties? How can we interpret this relationship compared to other issues? To answer these questions and test our third hypothesis we will first perform a simple binary analysis and check whether newspaper exposure had an effect on whom the public associated with the financial crisis. Afterwards, we carry out a multivariate analysis to determine whether other variables played a significant role.

First, we examined the relationship between newspaper exposure and what political party one associates with the financial crisis. Newspaper exposure was measured on a 6-point scale and recoded to a 3-point scale to facilitate interpretation. In Graph 7 the different values of each category are given. The political party one associates with the financial crisis is a nominal variable with the different political parties in Flanders as its values. To assess whether these two variables are significantly related, we draw on the Pearson Chi-square test. This test shows both variables to be significantly related ($\alpha < 0.05$) for the issue “financial crisis”.

Now we know both variables are related, we explore the nature of this relationship for the issue “financial crisis”. In what way are they related? Did newspaper exposure make the public more inclined to associate the financial crisis with its issue owners? How is this relationship for other issues? In Graph 7, we can see there is a remarkable relationship between exposure to newspapers and what parties the public associated with the financial crisis. People who more frequently read newspapers, were more likely to associate this issue with its issue owners, the Flemish political parties in the federal government. This chart consequently gives us a first indication that news media increased the ownership of the financial crisis in the advantage of its issue owners. A second interesting finding is that people who were less exposed to newspapers were less likely to associate the financial crisis with any political party at all. Eighteen percent of the sample who never reads newspapers could not name any party with whom they associate the financial crisis. For people who were exposed more than four times a week, this was a mere 10%. So it seems that newspaper exposure increased the probability to associate a political party with the financial crisis.

Graph 7: Newspaper exposure and the political party one associated with the financial crisis
(n=815)



Graph 7 gives an indication of the nature of the relationship between newspaper exposure and the political parties with whom the Flemish public associated the financial crisis. However, it does not give conclusive proof of the hypothesis that news media were a key source in determining the ownership of this new issue. Other variables might have played a vital role. Therefore, we performed some binary logistic regressions to control for different familiar socio-demographic and political variables and their effect on issue associations.

Did exposure to news media increase the probability that someone could associate a political party with the financial crisis?

First we handle the question whether exposure to news media increased the probability that someone could associate a political party with the financial crisis. From Graph 7 it is clear that the respondents who were more exposed to newspapers were more likely to associate a political party with the financial crisis. Now we check whether this relationship remains when we include several other variables in the analysis. We devote specific attention to the respondents who could not associate any political party with the financial crisis. In what way do they differ from the people who could associate a political party with the financial crisis?

Table 2 shows a binary logistic regression. Whether someone could (1) or could not (0) associate a political party with the financial crisis is the dependent variable in this model. Next to media exposure, we included a set of socio-demographic and political variables. A more detailed description of these variables can be found in Appendix 1. In this analysis we choose to include exposure to newspapers and television news as one variable measuring news media exposure. We accumulated both variables what resulted in a 12-point scale. The correlation between exposure to newspapers and television news was quite strong (0.6). Taking both variables together was, therefore, desirable to avoid multi-collinearity. The other independent variables in the model can be divided in socio-demographic and political variables. To get a notion of the effect of some basic characteristics, we included the variables: age, education and sex. Education was measured on a 10-point scale going from “no education” to “university level”. We found a very small (0.047) but significant ($\alpha < 0.1$) positive correlation between education and news media exposure. The two variables are thus related, but the strength of the association is very weak and therefore negligible. For the variable “sex”, zero stands for man and one for woman.

We take policy satisfaction into account because it is related to the record of performance of the incumbent, another possible source of issue ownership, next to exposure to news media. Another possible source of issue ownership is the political party's own communication. To grasp this in our analysis we calculated the sum of five variables relating to different kinds of political communication. A fourth source of issue ownership "a party's roots to social networks and political cleavages" is difficult to quantify and therefore not included in our analysis. We included the variables which give an indication of alternative sources of issue ownership (next to exposure to news media), to get a first indication of their relevance. We do not know their content and therefore do not have any hypothesis and are careful in drawing conclusions. They will mainly serve as control variables.

Drawing on the two-step flow model of Lazarsfeld, indicating mass media influence is strongly intervened by opinion leaders and social interaction, we included the variable "talking about politics" in our model (Glynn et al., 2004). This variable is based on the sum of three variables measuring the frequency someone had talked about politics with friends, family or colleagues in the past month. We also included the variables "political interest" and "trust in political institutions" in the model because their general relevance in studying political behavior (Schyns & Koop, 2007). For more detailed information concerning the variables and their values, we refer to Appendix 1.

Taking into account the effect of all the other described independent variables, news media exposure seems to be significantly ($\alpha < 0.05$) related to the ability of someone to associate the financial crisis with any political party at all. From Table 2 we can conclude that respondents who were more exposed to news media, were more able to associate a political party with the financial crisis. Next to news media exposure, education, talking about politics and trust in political institutions, seem to have a significant effect. Flemings who are highly educated, talked frequently about politics and have high trust in political institutions, were more likely to associate the financial crisis with a political party.

Table 2: Binary logistic regression: effects on the probability that someone could associate the financial crisis with a political party

<i>Independent Variable</i>	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	0.00	0.01	0.12	0.73	1.00
Sex	-0.39	0.21	3.49	0.06	0.68
Education	0.12	0.04	8.47	0.00	1.13
Exposure to News Media	0.10	0.04	6.54	0.01	1.10
Exposure to Party Communication	0.02	0.04	0.15	0.70	1.02
Policy Satisfaction	-0.08	0.11	0.54	0.46	0.92
Political Interest	0.03	0.05	0.35	0.55	1.03
Talking About Politics	0.16	0.05	9.85	0.00	1.17
Trust in Political Institutions	0.04	0.01	7.23	0.01	1.04
Constant	-1.81	0.68	7.01	0.01	0.16
<i>Hosmer-Lemeshow (Sig.)</i>					0.23
<i>Nagelkerke R2</i>					0.15
<i>Percentage correct</i>					75%
<i>n</i>					818

Despite significant effects of several independent variables, the overall predicting value of our model is poor, indicated by the low Nagelkerke R^2 (0.15). However the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit indicator shows satisfying results, not being significant at level ($\alpha < 0.1$). The overall fit of our model is thus sufficient. We can conclude for Flanders that under the control of socio-demographic and political variables, exposure to news media increased the probability for someone to associate the financial crisis with a political party. Consequently, our third hypothesis can be confirmed. Apart from the effect of news media exposure, some other variables seem to have played an important role.

But was this effect of news media exposure an exception for the issue “financial crisis” or does news media exposure has a general effect on the probability that someone can associate political parties and issues? To answer these questions we repeated the previous binary logistic regression and ran it for a set of seven other political issues. In Table 3, each row stands for one analysis of a political issue. The values expressed in Exp (B), also known as odds ratios, indicate the magnitude and direction of the effect of each independent variable on the probability for someone to associate a political party with the corresponding issue. An Exp(B) higher than one indicates a positive effect on the dependent and lower than one indicates a negative effect. The stars indicate the degree of significance of this value.

Table 3: Binary logistic regressions: effects on the probability that someone could associate an issue with a political party

	Financial Crisis	Mobility	Social Security	Environment	Taxes	Migration	Unemployment	State Reform
<i>Independent Variable</i>	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)
Age	1.00	1.00	1.01	0.97**	1.00	0.98***	0.99	1.01
Sex	0.68**	0.67**	1.07	0.70	0.72	0.66*	0.82	0.71
Education	1.13***	1.15***	1.30***	1.15*	1.19***	1.13***	1.14***	1.25***
Exposure to News Media	1.10**	1.09**	1.04	1.13*	1.10**	1.05	1.07*	1.05
Exposure to Party Communication	1.02	1.08*	1.01	0.97	0.98	0.98	1.00	1.00
Policy Satisfaction	0.92	1.19*	1.12	1.14	0.96	0.95	1.05	1.11
Political Interest	1.03	1.07	1.20***	1.00	1.15***	1.10*	1.18***	1.15***
Talking About Politics	1.17***	1.11**	1.35***	1.19*	1.11**	1.14**	1.12**	1.21***
Trust in Political Institutions	1.04***	1.03**	1.04**	1.01	1.04*	1.02	1.05***	1.05***
Constant	0.16***	0.055***	0.019***	5.48	0.12***	2.41	0.14***	0.041***
Nagekerke R2	0.15	0.19	0.31	0.12	0.20	0.14	0.20	0.26
Hosmer-Lemeshow (Sig.)	0.23	0.01	0.64	0.85	0.40	0.49	0.56	0.52
Percentage correct	75%	81%	89%	96%	83%	88%	86%	87%
n	818	818	818	818	818	818	818	818

*** $\alpha < 0.01$ ** $\alpha < 0.05$ * $\alpha < 0.1$

Drawing on this comparative analysis between issues, we see that news media exposure did not only matter for the financial crisis. Also for the issues taxes, environment, unemployment and mobility, exposure to news media significantly increased the probability for someone to associate these issues with a political party.

However, some other variables seem to be better in predicting whether someone can or cannot associate a political party with an issue in general. For every issue the level of education and talking about politics significantly increased the probability that someone could associate these issues with a political party. Next to education and talking about politics, political interest and trust in political institutions are variables that significantly affect the probability to associate a political party with an issue for the majority of political issues. From this point of view, the financial crisis is not an exception, but more or less similar to other political issues. It seems news media can serve as a source of inspiration to make a link between parties and issues. Nevertheless, other variables are at least equally important.

Did exposure to news media increase associative issue ownership in the advantage of the issue owners?

We saw news media exposure increased the probability that someone could associate a political party with the financial crisis, but did exposure to news media increase the ownership of the financial crisis in the advantage of its issue owners? To answer this question we performed a similar binary logistic regression as before, but with another dependent variable. Whether the respondent associated the financial crisis with its issue owners, the Flemish governing parties CD&V or Open Vld (1) or not (0) is the dependent variable of the logistic regression presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Binary logistic regression: effects on the probability that someone associated Open Vld or CD&V with the financial crisis

<i>Independent Variable</i>	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	0.00	0.01	0.23	0.63	1.00
Sex	-0.23	0.16	1.93	0.16	0.80
Education	0.18	0.03	28.36	0.00	1.20
Exposure to News Media	0.07	0.03	4.80	0.03	1.07
Exposure to Party Communication	0.01	0.03	0.11	0.74	1.01
Policy Satisfaction	0.06	0.09	0.44	0.51	1.06
Political Interest	0.02	0.04	0.34	0.56	1.02
Talking About Politics	0.05	0.04	2.02	0.16	1.06
Trust in Political Institutions	0.01	0.01	1.15	0.28	1.01
Constant	-2.09	0.56	14.16	0.00	0.12
<i>Hosmer-Lemeshow (Sig.)</i>					0.66
<i>Nagelkerke R2</i>					0.11
<i>Percentage correct</i>					69%
<i>n</i>					793

From Table 4 we can derive what variables contribute to the probability of associating the financial crisis with its issue owners. This analysis tells us that, under the control of conventional socio-demographic variables and typical political variables, the relationship found between news media exposure and the probability to associate the financial crisis with its issue owners holds true. We can conclude exposure to news media significantly ($\alpha < 0.05$) increased the probability that someone associated the financial crisis with its issue owners, the political parties in office. Our fourth hypothesis, that news media are a source in determining ownership of a new issue, can be verified for the financial crisis in Flanders. Exposure to party communication did not have a significant effect on the probability to associate the financial crisis with its issue owners. Education proved to be the most significant ($\alpha < 0.001$) of all independent variables. Summarized: people who had higher education and were more frequently exposed to news media, were more inclined to associate the financial crisis with its issue owners, the Flemish governing parties.

Despite significant effects of exposure to news media and education, we can honestly say a great deal of the underlying dynamics determining the ownership of the financial crisis and other newly emerging issues remains unknown. With a poor Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.11, we cannot say this model gives a full clarification on the sources determining issue ownership. Nevertheless, the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test indicates a satisfying value, not being significant ($\alpha < 0.1$).

Based on the previous analysis we can conclude exposure to news media increased the probability for someone to associate the financial crisis in the advantage of its issue owners, the governing parties. But how did news media exposure affect associative issue ownership of other political issues? Did news media exposure increase the probability one associated an issue with its owner in general? To answer this question we determined for seven other issues, who their issue owners were. We did so based on the questions with which political party one associates those seven issues. When one single party has more than 25% of the associations with that issue and leaves another party behind with at least 5%, we see it as the issue owner. For all the issues we could identify an owner based on this criterion, except for the financial crisis. For the financial Open Vld and CD&V stood for respectively 32% and 34% of all the associations made with the issue. In Table 5, we give an overview of all the assessed issues and their identified owners.

Table 5: The percentages of associations between an issue and its owner

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Issue owner(s)</i>	<i>% of all association with the issue</i>	<i>n</i>
The financial crisis	Open Vld	32%	882
	CD&V	34%	
Mobility	sp.a	29%	883
Social security	sp.a	54%	892
Environment	Groen!	89%	899
Taxes	Open Vld	51%	883
Migration	Vlaams Belang	50%	886
Unemployment	sp.a	46%	885
State reform	NV.A	38%	887

We know now who the owners of these eight issues were. But did exposure to the news media increase the probability that someone associated issues with their owners, as it did for the financial crisis? To answer this question, we performed a set of binary logistic regressions. The dependent variables in these regressions are whether someone did (1) or did not (0) associate the named issue with its issue owner as identified in Table 5. Every issue thus has its own dependent variable, based on its issue owner. We included the same independent variables as we did in the other models. Table 6 gives an overview of these binary logistic regressions performed for all the assessed issues. Similar to Table 4, each row stands for a political issue. The values expressed in Exp (B) indicate the magnitude and direction of the effect of each independent variable on the probability someone associated the corresponding issue with its issue owner.

Table 6: Binary logistic regressions: effects on the probability that someone associates an issue with its owner

<i>Independent Variable</i>	Financial Crisis	Mobility	Social Security	Environment	Taxes	Migration	Unemployment	State Reform
	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)
Age	1.00	0.99	0.98***	0.95***	1.00	0.97***	1.00	1.00
Sex	0.80	1.01	0.92	1.14	1.19	0.80	0.91	0.69**
Education	1.20***	1.03	1.21***	1.12**	1.23***	1.01	1.22***	1.25***
Exposure to News Media	1.07**	1.03	1.00	1.07	1.04	1.03	0.97	1.10***
Exposure to Party Communication	1.01	1.02	0.99	1.00	0.96	0.95*	1.04	0.97
Policy Satisfaction	1.06	1.10	0.97	1.14	1.00	0.90	1.10	1.39***
Political Interest	1.02	1.09**	1.17***	0.99	1.18***	1.05	1.17***	1.17***
Talking About Politics	1.06	1.04	1.05	1.00	1.07*	0.98	1.00	1.07*
Trust in Political Institutions	1.01	0.99	1.00	1.01	1.01	0.99	1.00	0.98
Constant	0.12***	0.14***	0.42*	20.47***	0.06***	14.45***	0.06***	0.01***
Nagekerke R2	0.11	0.04	0.17	0.15	0.18	0.10	0.15	0.24
Hosmer-Lemeshow (Sig.)	0.66	0.76	0.07	0.54	0.19	0.75	0.94	0.07
Percentage correct	69%	72%	66%	89%	66%	62%	65%	71%
n	793	796	803	810	797	799	799	804

*** $\alpha < 0.01$ ** $\alpha < 0.05$ * $\alpha < 0.1$

From Table 6 we can conclude that news media exposure only affected the probability to associate an issue with its owner for the issues “financial crisis” and “state reform”. For these issues, people who were more exposed to news media, were more inclined to associate these issues with their owners. For the other issues, exposure to news media had no significant effect on the probability that someone associated those issues with their owner. Once again, education seems to have a general effect on associative issue ownership. For all the issues, except mobility and migration, education significantly increases the probability to associate those issues with their owner. It seems that higher educated people are more inclined to associate an issue with its owner. As in our previous comparative model, political interest significantly increases the probability to associate an issue with its owner for several political issues.

We conclude that news media exposure had an important effect on associative issue ownership of the financial crisis. Respondents who were more exposed to news media were more able to associate the financial crisis with a political party. News media exposure also increased the probability that someone associated the financial crisis with its issue owners, the Flemish governing parties. The combination of these two findings is only applicable to the financial crisis issue. For some other issues news media exposure did increase the probability that someone could either associate any political party with the issue or associate the issue with its owner, but never both. In that way associative issue ownership of the financial crisis was more affected by news media exposure compared to other issues. Whether this is due to its new nature, we hope to explore in future research.

2.5 Relevance for voting behavior

To end our study, we briefly turn to the effects of associative issue ownership of the financial crisis on voting behavior. We gave proof news media exposure increased the probability to associate a political party with the financial crisis and that it increased the amount of associations with the financial crisis in the advantage of its owners, the Flemish parties in the federal government. We can therefore say that the news media had a significant effect and were a determining source of associative issue ownership of the financial crisis. But did it all matter? Did people who associated the financial crisis with Open Vld and CD&V during the 2009 election campaign also vote for those parties? In Table 7 we present a binary logistic regression with as dependent variable whether someone voted (1) or did not vote (0) for Open Vld or CD&V. The respondents were asked in a third wave of the survey research, two weeks after the elections took place, what party they voted for. We recoded the answers to this question into a binary variable and included it as the dependent variable in the model presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Binary logistic regression: effects on the probability that someone voted for the governing parties

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	0.01	0.01	6.03	0.01	1.01
Sex	0.18	0.18	1.09	0.30	1.20
Education	-0.09	0.04	5.90	0.02	0.91
Exposure to News Media	0.02	0.03	0.29	0.59	1.02
Exposure to Party Communication	-0.01	0.03	0.07	0.79	0.99
Policy Satisfaction	-0.02	0.10	0.02	0.88	0.98
Political Interest	-0.11	0.04	6.69	0.01	0.89
Talking About Politics	-0.08	0.04	4.08	0.04	0.92
Trust in Political Institutions	0.03	0.01	5.67	0.02	1.03
Associated Financial Crisis with Incumbent	0.67	0.19	12.23	0.00	1.96
Agreement with ideas CD&V	0.56	0.07	72.83	0.00	1.74
Agreement with ideas Open VLD	0.18	0.05	11.43	0.00	1.19
Constant	-5.37	0.73	54.10	0.00	0.00
<i>Hosmer-Lemeshow (Sig.)</i>					0.67
<i>Nagelkerke R2</i>					0.3
<i>Percentage correct</i>					72%
<i>n</i>					757

We integrated the same independent variables as the former models, but brought in some new ones too. We included the level of agreement the respondents had with ideas of both Open Vld and CD&V. In the survey, the respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the ideas of those parties. Both variables were measured on a 10-point scale going from “totally not agree” to “totally agree”. Our major independent variable is whether someone did (1) or did not (0) associate the financial crisis with its issue owners.

From Table 7 we can conclude that associative issue ownership of the financial crisis did have an impact on the voter’s choice at the 2009 Flemish elections. The found relationship is significant at a level of ($\alpha < .001$). It is clear that the people who associated the financial crisis with the Flemish governing parties were more inclined to vote for those parties too. From the Exp (b), we can determine that people who associated the financial crisis with its issue owners, were twice as likely to vote for these parties compared to the people who did not, and this under the control of the other independent variables. Based on the B coefficients, associating the financial crisis with the governing parties seems to be the best predictor of all the included parameters in our model to estimate whether someone voted for those parties or not. Exposure to news media did not have a direct effect on whether someone voted for the governing parties or not. However, it could be that news media exposure triggered an association between the financial crisis and the Flemish governing parties and so indirectly had an influence on voting behavior. Furthermore, it seems the highly educated and politically interested people were less inclined to vote for Open Vld or CD&V. The model has a satisfying predicting value indicated by the R^2 of 0.3 and a fine goodness of fit, indicated by the non-significant ($\alpha < 0.1$) Hosmer and Lemeshow test.

Since the voting effects of associative issue ownership are not the main focus of this paper, we will not further elaborate on this subject. To get a general view on the effects of associative issue ownership of the financial crisis a multinomial logistic regression would be a more appropriate technique studying this question. To get a better idea on campaign and news media effects on voting behavior for the 2009 Flemish elections, we warmly recommend the doctoral dissertation of Jonas Lefevere (2011): “Campaign effects on voter decision making”. In our study, we merely wanted to highlight, next to the sources of associative issue ownership, its importance to voting behavior based on the ownership of the most salient issue of the 2009 Flemish elections: “the financial crisis”.

3 Conclusion

For decades, political scientists have been trying to disentangle the mystery behind voting behavior. The issue ownership theory helped to unveil part of that mystery. In literature, we found issue ownership to be a vague and multidimensional concept. Its associative variant, on the contrary, is very tangible and an adequate measure of voting behavior, independent of party identification. But how does the ownership of an issue emerge? Which variables trigger an association between a political party and an issue? In literature, we could distinguish four sources determining the ownership of an issue. We chose to examine the news media because of its much-debated influence and its proven effects on the policy and public agenda. An important threshold to examine this influence is the stable nature of issue ownership. To cope with this, we chose to assess news media influence on associative ownership of a *new* issue, the financial crisis. Besides being a new issue, it was the most salient issue to the public at the time of the 2009 Flemish elections.

First, we assessed who claimed the ownership of this issue. As hypothesized, the Flemish governing parties Open Vld and CD&V were both strongly associated with the financial crisis. Probably because they were responsible for coping with this problem. From the content analysis, we could derive that this ownership was at least for some part determined by the ownership of the closely related issue “economic policy”.

Despite being codetermined by the ownership of economic policy, we proved the news media played a significant role in the ownership of the financial crisis. We showed that the associations between political parties and issues made in newspapers are very similar to the associations made by the public for all assessed issues. The news media associated the same political parties and issues as the public did. We found the strongest similarity between news media and the public for the issue “financial crisis”. Next to this strong similarity, we found news media exposure had a significant effect on associative issue ownership of the financial crisis. People who were more exposed to news media, were more able to associate a political party with the issue. Also for a set of other issues news media exposure seemed to have increased the probability someone could associate those issues with a political party. Next to increasing the probability to associate an issue with a political party, news media exposure increased issue ownership of the financial crisis in the advantage of its owners. The probability that respondents associated the financial crisis with its issue owners was higher for the respondents who were more exposed to news media. This was not the case for other issues, except for the issue “state reform”.

The financial crisis was the only issue where news media exposure increased the probability someone could associate this issue with a political party *and* lead to an increased probability to associate it with its owners.

The news media are no hypodermic needles, injecting issue ownership of new issues in the public mind, but they certainly affect it. Besides being affected by the news media, it seems associative issue ownership of the financial crisis had an impact on voting behavior at the 2009 Flemish elections. Respondents who associated the financial crisis with the Flemish parties in the federal government, were twice as likely to vote for these parties. The effect of associative issue ownership on voting was not our main focus, but gives additional proof of the relevance of our study.

Compared to other issues, the ownership of the financial crisis was unique in its similarity to the news media and effects of exposure to news media. We believe this is due to its *new* nature. As we see it, the news media have more latitude to influence issue ownership of new issues because of their unclaimed nature. However, new issues do not arise in a vacuum. They get interpreted in terms of already existing predispositions and partly in terms of an already existing ownership. To get clarity on news media effects on the ownership of new issues and their effects on voting behavior, more case studies of new issues are needed. In future research, we hope to come to a clear view on generalizable characteristics determining the ownership of newly emerging issues and their electoral consequences.

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5 Annex 1

Age

- Age of the respondent measured in years

Sex

- What is your sex?
 - 0 = man
 - 1 = woman

Education

- What is your highest education?
 - 0 = No education
 - 1 = Elementary education
 - 2 = Professional secondary education (not completed)
 - 3 = Technical secondary education (not completed)
 - 4 = General secondary education (not completed)
 - 5 = Professional secondary education (completed)
 - 6 = Technical secondary education (completed)
 - 7 = General secondary education (completed)
 - 8 = Higher non-university diploma
 - 9 = University diploma

News media exposure

This variable was calculated using the sum of two other variables:

1. How frequently did you read the newspapers in the last two weeks?
 - 1 = Never
 - 2 = Less than once a week
 - 3 = one or two days a week
 - 4 = three or four times a week
 - 5 = almost every day
 - 6 = systematically every day
2. How frequently did you watch television news in the last two weeks?

Exposure to party communication

This variable was calculated using the sum of four other variables:

1. How frequently did you visit the website of a political party last month?
 - 1 = Never
 - 2 = Seldom
 - 3 = Sometimes
 - 4 = Often
2. How frequently did you look at printed media of a political party like a folder or party magazine last month ?
3. How frequently did you see an advertisement of a political party last month, for example: in newspapers or on television?
4. How frequently did you have direct contact with activists or members of a political party last month?

Policy satisfaction

To what extent are you satisfied with the policy of the Flemish government of the last five years?

- 1 = very unsatisfied
- 2 = unsatisfied
- 3 = not satisfied nor unsatisfied
- 4 = satisfied
- 5 = very satisfied

Political Interest

To what extent are you interested in politics in general?

- 1 = Not interested at all
- 2 – 9 = intermediary values without a label
- 10 = Very interested

Trust in political institutions

This variable was calculated using the sum of five other variables:

1. To what measure do you trust political parties in general?
 - 1 = Not trusting at all
 - 2 – 9 = intermediary values without a label
 - 10 = Very trusting
2. To what measure do you trust the Flemish government?
3. To what measure do you trust the Flemish parliament?
4. To what measure do you trust the federal government?
5. To what measure do you trust the federal parliament?