Issue Ownership, Issue Convergence or Spatial Proximity? Explaining the 1998-2012 Dutch election results from Issue Salience and Issue Positions in the Media

Jan Kleinnijenhuis
VU University Amsterdam, Department of Communication Science

Jonas Lefevere
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR)

Keywords: issue ownership, issue convergence, proximity voting, spatial models, issue voting, campaign effects.

Correspondence: j.kleinnijenhuis@vu.nl

The author is much indebted to Annemarie Walter who contributed to earlier versions of this paper, and to Jan de Ridder, Dirk Oegema, Anita van Hoof, Janet Takens and Wouter van Atteveldt who contributed to the design and implementation of some of the content analysis studies and panel survey studies on which the research for this paper is based.

Paper prepared for Presentation at the ECPR General Conference in Prague, 2016.
Abstract

Shifts in electoral politics have increased the role of issue voting, and various models seek to understand how parties’ issue emphasis during electoral campaigns translates into electoral support. However, work directly comparing these models is rare. Moreover, parties’ issue communication reaches voters mainly through the news media, yet no studies examine the two-step process through which media coverage of issues and parties affects voter’s attitudes, which in turn determine voting behaviour. For three of the most prominent models of issue voting - issue ownership, issue convergence and issue proximity - we develop a theoretical framework of the process through which media coverage of parties and issues affects electoral outcomes. We investigate firstly how media coverage of parties and issues affects voter’s issue perceptions. Secondly, we examine how shifts in voter’s issue perceptions affect electoral outcomes. We test our propositions on the Dutch national elections between 1998 and 2012, using survey data combined with an extensive media content analysis. Whereas all three models receive support, saliency models of issue voting seem to outperform proximity models in our data. We also show that the model’s effectiveness in predicting electoral outcomes varies from election to election, and that this can be explained by examining how parties’ positions and issue emphasis fluctuate across campaigns. The results are a step forwards towards an integrated theory of electoral competition that comprises successful components of each of the three models.
Introduction

Contemporary studies on electoral politics are increasingly attentive to the role of issue perceptions as determinants of electoral choices. There is good reason for this, as the weakened ideological ties between voters and parties, the rise of electoral volatility and the decreasing importance of traditional determinants of people’s vote choices have spurred the rise of alternative models for understanding why voters prefer one party over another. Attention to issue voting, or the idea that issue perceptions of voters shape their electoral choices, has in turn boomed in the past decades (see, e.g. Green & Hobolt, 2008; Lefevere, Tresch, & Walgrave, 2015; Sanders, Clarke, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2011). In parallel, we have seen rapid development of models seeking to understand how parties’ communications during the campaign affect electoral outcomes.

Yet, the field has not reached a consensus regarding the strategies that parties adopt, nor on their effects on parties’ success at the polls – far from it, in fact. On the one hand, proponents of issue ownership theory argue that parties win elections by ‘sticking to their guns’: parties win when they focus on owned issues and ignore issues owned by opponents (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1989). This reasoning directly opposes the argument of issue convergence adherents who claim that parties win over voters by showing they attend to the issues voters consider important, regardless of their ownership of these issues. Such strategies usually lead parties to converge on these issues with their political opponents (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Convergence and issue ownership both assert that parties’ issue strategies are based on a selective emphasis on issues, leaving the issue positioning of parties mostly aside (but see e.g. Lachat, 2014). Conversely, spatial issue voting models put issue positions front and centre, and do not focus much on parties’ issue emphasis. These models argue that parties win elections when and if they are able to take issue positions that appeal to the median voter
OWNERSHIP, CONVERGENCE OR PROXIMITY

(Downs, 1957; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Sanders et al., 2011; Stokes, 1963; Van der Eijk, Schmitt, & Binder, 2005).

All models have received empirical support—see e.g. Walgrave, Tresch and Lefevere (2015) for issue ownership, Sigelman and Buell (2004) for convergence and Enelow & Hinich (2008) for spatial models. Yet, we believe three major outstanding issues remain. Firstly, and most importantly, most extant work has only examined part of the two-step process that translates parties’ issue strategies into electoral support. Parties communicate strategically through selective emphasis and issue positioning, but in the age of mediated politics the media are a crucial intermediary actor (Bennett & Entman, 2001), and various other factors also influence the media agenda: though individual parties may seek to affect the media agenda, also the interaction between parties (e.g. conflict), and real world events profoundly affect the construction of the media agenda. Hence, the issue perceptions of voters are affected through media depictions of party strategies, rather than direct party communication. In turn, voter’s issue perceptions then shape electoral behaviour. Thus, all models on issue voting share that the process of translating parties’ issue strategies into electoral outcomes entails two steps: firstly, media coverage shapes voter’s issue perceptions. Secondly, these perceptions affect electoral behaviour. With the exception of Kiousis, Strömback and McDevitt (2015), who build an integrated model for issue ownership, extant work only captures part of this two-step process: the role of media in changing issue perceptions has received ample attention in work on issue ownership and issue convergence (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009), but only few studies have examined how shifts in issue ownership perceptions over time affect electoral outcomes. Conversely, scholarly work on spatial theories emphasized the role of media far less (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010;
Thesen, Green-Pedersen, & Mortensen, 2014), but has systematically compared which perceptions are crucial for electoral gains, e.g. directional versus proximity models.

Secondly, scholars have only begun to compare and combine models based on issue salience and positions. Though spatial theory did compare variants of the theory, e.g. directional theory versus proximity theory (Lewis & King, 1999; Tomz, Van Houweling, & Sniderman, 2006; Westholm, 1997), and there is increasing attention to the combined impact of issue positions and salience on voting behaviour (Green & Hobolt, 2008), comparisons on variants of issue salience theories – issue convergence and issue ownership especially – do not exist.

Thirdly, though both issue ownership and issue convergence acknowledge issue positions, empirical work seldom accounts for their theoretical assumptions regarding parties’ positioning (but see Lachat, 2014). Issue ownership theory assumes that parties keep their positions constant over time (Budge & Farlie, 1983), and only vary their emphasis (Petrocik, 1989). Conversely, issue convergence theory asserts that parties address similar issues because they seek to debate these issues. This assumes that parties take different positions on these issues (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Yet, the empirical work on both theories almost exclusively measures issue emphasis, and rarely tests whether parties’ positioning reflects these assumptions.

To this end, this paper seeks to do three things. First, we aim to investigate to what extent these three theories – issue ownership, issue convergence and issue proximity – grasp how voters make electoral decisions. Second, we examine both steps in the process outlined above. Third, we incorporate both salience and positions in our argumentation of the three theories. On the one hand, our tests of issue ownership and convergence account for their assumptions regarding parties’ issue positions. On the other hand, in our assessment of spatial theory we factor in issue salience as well. Our theoretical framework results in two
propositions for each model – one regarding the impact of media on voter’s perceptions as they relate to the three models, and another regarding the impact of these perceptions on voter’s electoral choice.

We test these propositions using data collected during the Dutch national election campaigns from 1998 until 2012. We use data gathered in a media content analysis that tracks parties’ issue saliency and issue positions. We then combine these data with survey data that tracks voter’s issue perceptions and electoral preferences. These longitudinal data are unique, as far as we can tell, and allow us to examine how media coverage on parties’ issue emphasis and positions shapes voter’s issue perceptions, and how these perceptions then affect electoral outcomes. Moreover, these longitudinal data allow us to control for parties’ issue emphasis in the prior campaign, as well as parties’ issue position shifts. We find that issue ownership theory and issue convergence theory, notwithstanding their different assumptions, are overall superior in predicting electoral support. However, the strength of the models varies substantially depending on the context: saliency approaches are outperformed by proximity in instances where parties strategically alter their issue positions to attract voters.

Three models of issue voting

Issue ownership

Issue ownership theory posits that a party will win at the elections if the issues it ‘owns’ dominate the media, and become the criteria by which voters make their choice (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1989). A party owns an issue if it has the reputation of handling the issue better than its opponents. These issue reputations relate to social cleavages that have shaped the party landscape (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Stubager & Slothuus, 2013). At the aggregate and individual level, numerous studies show the electoral rewards for parties that emphasize owned issues (e.g. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Bellucci, 2006; Blomqvist & Green-

Issue ownership has recently been conceptualized as consisting of a competence and an associative dimension (Walgrave et al., 2012). We focus here on associative issue ownership, which refers to “the spontaneous identification of parties with issues in the minds of voters, regardless of whether voters consider the party to be the most competent to deal with these issues; it is the consequence of long-term party attention to the issue” (Walgrave et al., 2012, p. 772). The core component of associative issue ownership is the identification of parties with issues. Issue ownership theory expects parties to emphasize issues on which they are advantaged because of the long-term relationship between a party’s issues and the characteristics of its supporters. By doing so, they aim to make issues on which they are strong more salient amongst the electorate, which in turn increases electoral support (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996).

To predict when parties will gain electorally from emphasizing owned issues, we need to consider parties’ issue attention relative to other parties’ issue attention, because parties’ issue ownership is often disputed in campaigns (Arndt, 2014; Geys, 2012; Green & Hobolt, 2008). Parties profit from associations with an issue when they own an issue - and parties own issues when their issue associations are stronger relative to their competitors. Moreover, issue ownership refers to a party’s long-standing association with an issue. Hence, in order for the party to actually build a reputation on an issue (and benefit electorally from it), it should emphasize the issue not just in the current campaign, but also previous campaigns: it is by consistently emphasizing issues over longer periods of time that parties build reputations (Egan, 2013). That said, it should be clear that parties have only partial control over which
issues will dominate the campaign, as the media agenda is driven by real-world conditions (e.g. refugee crisis), key events (e.g. 9/11) and the strategies of competing parties.

Most voters perceive parties’ emphasis on their owned issues through the media. Indeed, media issue coverage linking parties to issues affects voter’s issue ownership perceptions (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; De Bruycker & Walgrave, 2014; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Additionally, earlier research showed the effect of voters’ party-issue specific associations on the vote (van der Brug, 2004; Lachat, 2014; Walgrave et al., 2012). This leads us to expect that the stronger media associate a party with an issue (compared to its competitors and previous campaigns), the stronger that party’s issue ownership on that issue will become. In turn, the more voters associate the party with an issue, the greater the electoral support for that party becomes.

The strength of parties’ issue associations, however, also depends on the positions they take in the campaign. Media coverage only generates strong issue associations if parties take positions that are consistent with prior campaigns, and positions that are firm. Issue ownership originates in parties’ historical ties to an issue (Petrocik, 1996). Therefore, parties have enduring positions on owned issues, as these positions are in the interest of their electorate (Stubager & Slothuus, 2013). To affirm and strengthen their reputation – their association to the issue – parties need to act in line with how they acted before (Budge, 2015).

\[H1a: \text{On issues where a party takes a firm position that is consistent with prior campaigns, stronger party’s associative issue ownership according to the media leads, amongst voters, to stronger associations of that party with that issue.}\]

In terms of electoral choice, the expectation is that stronger associations between parties and issues increase the vote share of a party. Yet, also here the role of positions needs to be accounted for. We argue that issue reputations matter if voters agree with the party on that issue. One reason for this is the fact that issue ownership assumes that voters decide
based on valence issues (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008), on which agreement between voters and parties can be assumed (Stokes, 1963). Parties owning a valence issue stand to win as the issue’s salience increases: all voters agree with the party on the issue – and on that issue the issue owner has the strongest reputation (Sanders et al., 2011). Walgrave et al. (2012) found this to be the case. However, on positional issues the assumption of voter agreement is less certain. Following Bélanger and Meguid (2008, p. 483), we assume that strong party-issue associations affect the vote only if voters agree with the party on that issue.

\[ H1b: \text{Assuming voters agree with the party, the stronger a party’s associative issue ownership according to voters, the more that party’s vote share increases.} \]

**Issue convergence**

Issue convergence maintains that parties do not emphasize their own issues but rather ‘ride the waves’ of the dominant issues in the media (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Although parties may prefer to speak about their own issues, issues that become important in a campaign just cannot be ignored and must be discussed (Green & Hobolt, 2008). Parties need to be seen as informed, concerned and responsive about “the major issues of the day” (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994, p. 337). When competing parties discuss the same issues during an election campaign, we speak of issue convergence. Extant research shows that parties often converge on the same issues (Damore, 2005; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Correlational evidence suggests that parties who did not converge on highly salient issues are unpopular (Green, 2011). However, systematic evidence to show the electoral benefits of issue convergence is almost absent (but see Arndt, 2014).

Issue convergence theory assumes positional conflict on the issues parties converge on: convergence theory implies that parties debate these issues, and thus offer different viewpoints (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). This enables a dialogue between diverging issue
positions. Media also reward politicians who contribute to the debate about these issues with media attention (Strömbäck, 2005). In their three-country study of electoral campaigns, Van Der Pas and Vliegenthart (2015) show that positional conflict fosters media attention. In turn, media coverage of issue convergence increases voter’s awareness of parties’ opposing issue positions which leads to discussion, deliberation and dialogue. Voters are assumed to neglect issues on which there is no discussion, and most importantly they neglect parties that do not engage in discussions. Yet, most extant research only examines whether parties discuss similar issues, but not whether they take differing positions (Lipsitz, 2013). Attention to an issue is not always accompanied by dialogue but rather with vague and ambiguous valence statements or with negativity and attacks, which cannot be relied on to boost voter’s issue position knowledge (Lipsitz, 2013). Hence, the theoretical assumption of positional conflict that underlies the convergence model needs to be put to the empirical test: we examine whether discussing similar issues affects electoral outcomes when parties have positional conflict on an issue in the current campaign. Thus, we test whether a party gains electoral support if it addresses the salient issues of the campaign and if other parties take opposing positions on these issues.

As far as we know, no prior studies on convergence have developed a rationale regarding the causal chain that leads converging parties to enjoy electoral benefits. We argue that parties’ issue convergence mainly affects voter’s party-issue associations: similar to issue ownership theory, convergence theory is mainly about parties’ issue emphasis, and therefore it makes sense to expect a similar causal chain (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). As media coverage increasingly links parties to issues, voters that are exposed to such coverage increasingly start to associate these parties and issues, especially as they debate these issues with clear viewpoints. However, given convergence’s emphasis on debate, we expect that such associations will only form when parties actually debate – take different positions on – issues.
**H2a:** The more a party converges on a dominant campaign issue on which parties are in positional conflict according to the media, the stronger voters associate the party with that issue.

In turn, this perceived advantage on an issue makes it more likely that voters prefer parties with the strongest issue associations. However, also here voters should be aware of the positional conflict: if convergence is about parties gaining ground by disagreeing on the main issues of the day (Sigelman & Buell, 2004), then parties should gain ground if – and only if – voters actually perceive them as being in conflict on the issue. Hence, in the second convergence hypothesis we assert that party-issue associations only affect the vote if voters perceive parties to take different positions on an issue.

**H2b:** The stronger a party is associative issue owner of issues that both dominate the campaign and on which voters think that parties’ positions vary, the higher its vote share in that election.

**Proximity theory**

Finally, spatial theories of electoral competition assume that parties do not compete on separate issues, but rather on overarching ideological dimensions, most notably on the left-right axis (Downs, 1957; Sanders et al., 2011; Van der Eijk et al., 2005) and on a cultural GALTAN-dimension (green, alternative and libertarian versus traditional, authoritarian and nationalist, cf. Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2002). Critically, spatial theories focus on positions, rather than salience. Although theories of issue ownership and issue convergence acknowledge the importance of parties’ issue positions (e.g. Lachat, 2014), they still maintain that parties compete primarily through their emphasis on issues rather than through their positions. However, spatial theories argue and empirically demonstrate that positions are a crucial part of parties’ issue competition (Arndt, 2014; Dolezal, Ennser-Jedenastik, Müller, &
Winkler, 2014; Kriesi et al., 2008). Yet, being close to voters is not enough: various studies show that parties win elections when they hold issue positions that are shared by many voters but not many competitors (Adams, 2012; Kriesi et al., 2008; Laver & Sergenti, 2012; Muis, 2009; Sanders et al., 2011). As such, the theory has straightforward expectations in terms of the attitudes that drive electoral behaviour: we expect that voters will vote for a party that they perceive as being the least distant on overarching dimensions they consider to be important (H3b). This expectation is hardly novel and extant work has amply demonstrated that voters prefer parties that they perceive as having similar policy positions (Tomz et al., 2006; Westholm, 1997).

What proximity theory has not extensively examined is how media coverage may affect voter’s issue perceptions in the first place. Unsurprisingly, we argue that it is mainly coverage on parties’ positions that is crucial. Much in the same way that parties show they consider an issue important by emphasizing it in media coverage, parties inform voters about their issue positions through media appearances (Dancey & Goren, 2010; Lenz, 2009, 2012). As proximity theory traditionally examines distances between voters and parties on overarching issue dimensions (Cho & Endersby, 2003; Pardos-Prado & Dinas, 2010), we formulate our hypotheses in terms of these overarching dimensions as well.

\textit{H3a: As a party’s overarching issue positions get more attention in the media, voter’s perceptions of these issue positions becomes more similar to those portrayed in the media.}

In line with proximity theory, the second proximity hypothesis posits that the smaller the distance between voters and parties, the greater that parties’ vote share will become. We account for an issue’s salience: it is unlikely that issues that voters do not consider important have a great impact – disagreeing with a party on an issue that is considered less important does not matter as much as disagreement on an important issue.
**H3b:** The smaller the distance between voter’s own positions and a parties’ perceived positions on issue dimensions considered salient by voters, the more that party’s vote share increases.

Summing up our theoretical argument, Table 1 provides a succinct overview of the hypotheses. In the next section we describe the method and data we use to evaluate these hypotheses.

<Table 1 here>
Data and Methods

To test our propositions, we focus on the Dutch case. The Dutch electoral system is one of the most proportionally representative systems in the world, with a large number of competing parties (Lijphart, 1999). We chose the Netherlands for two reasons. Firstly, political advertising does not play a big role in Dutch election campaigns (Brants, 2006), which makes the mass media critical for campaigning. Moreover, the large amount of parties creates fierce competition over limited media attention (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007), which should ensure variation in the media coverage across the various campaigns. Secondly, the Netherlands is one of the most electorally volatile countries in Western Europe (Mair, 2008). This ensures considerable variation in electoral party support, which is the second key dependent variable. We examine the Dutch parliamentary elections from 1998 until 2012, with the exception of the 2003 elections – which were held just one year after the 2002 elections - because we do not have survey data for this campaign. With a few exceptions, all parties that were part of the Dutch Lower House after the elections are included. The parties included are CU (Christian Union), CDA (Christian Democrats), SGP (Christian Theocrats), D66 (Progressive Liberals), GL (Green Left), LPF (List Pim Fortuyn), PvdA (Labour Party), PVV (Freedom Party), SP (Socialist Party), VVD (Liberal Party) and PvdD (Animal Rights Party). For each election, we have two datasets at our disposal: an extensive media content analysis, and survey data.

Our media content analysis tracks newspaper and television coverage for each of the five election campaigns. The length of the media coverage data collection differs across election campaigns because this is dependent on the length of the actual campaign. In 1998 and 2002 almost 8 months were examined, but in 2012 only 2 months, 4 months in 2006 and 3,5 months in 2010. The text of all news items was analysed according to the Core Sentences Approach (CSA), which reduces each sentence to its most basic structure (Dolezal et al.,
We focus here on issue statements, which link an issue (the object) to a party (the subject) while also including the direction of the relationship between the two (pro or con). In total, we dispose of 4828, 5297, 4996, 4797 and 3467 such issue statements for the election campaigns of 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2012 respectively. Intercoder reliability has been measured for almost every election campaign. The scores on measures such as Krippendorff’s alpha for interval data were satisfactory (in the range of 0.67-0.8, with a few exceptions upwards and downwards) (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). These issue statements are grouped in 13 issues: education, health care, employment, mobility, environment, government expenditures & taxes, social security, crime and unsafety, immigration, norms and values, administrative reforms, European cooperation, other.

In addition to the media content data, we have survey data at our disposal for the same five election campaigns. In each election campaign, a panel survey was fielded amongst a random sample of respondents, which aims to be representative for the Dutch voting population. The survey data was collected by TNS NIPO in 1998 (n=1045), Blauw Research in 2003 (n=926), NetPanel Ruigrok in 2006 (n=1196), and IntomartGfK in 2010 (n=1362) and 2012 (n=1344). Note that the number of respondents between brackets is the amount of respondents in the last panel survey wave, who answered all questions relevant to our study.

Prior to discussing the dependent and independent variables in our analysis, two overall points need to be clarified. Firstly, since voters are only affected by the news content of the media that they are actually exposed to, media content was only assigned to a respondent when the respondent indicated he actually used that medium (for a similar approach, see Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2014). Secondly, our analysis takes an aggregate approach, but the level of aggregation needs to differ depending on the hypotheses.
we test. For hypotheses dealing with the impact of media on voter perceptions on specific issues (H1a, H2a), we predict voter perceptions for 531 unique combinations of issues, parties and campaigns. For H3a, which deals with two overarching issue dimensions – the left-right and GAL-TAN dimension – we use a dataset where the specific issues are aggregated to these 2 dimensions.

For hypotheses predicting electoral outcomes (H1b, H2b, H3b), the above data need to be further aggregated across issues, because our dependent variable – a party’s amount of seats obtained after the elections – only varies over parties and campaigns, but not issues. This results in a dataset with 44 unique party-campaign combinations.

*Operationalisation of Dependent Variables*

*Voter’s party issue association* is the dependent variable in H1a and H2a. It is measured through the following question: ‘which of the issues below comes to mind first if you think about < party i >? And which issue next?’ (Kleinnijenhuis & Pennings, 2001; Walgrave et al., 2012). Up to two issues could be associated with a party. Respondents could choose from a list of issues and were also able to add other issues. *Voter’s party issue association* is then the proportion of respondents that linked a party to an issue, and ranges between 0 (no respondents linked the party to the issue) and 1 (all respondents linked the party to the issue).

For H3a, the dependent variable is *Voter’s Perceived Position of Party*, which tracks voter’s perceptions of party positions on two major policy dimensions – the left-right dimension and the GAL-TAN dimension. After indicating which issues voters associated with parties, voters were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the party on the issue on a 5-point scale ranging from ‘disagree completely’ (-1) to ‘agree completely’ (+1). This yields voter’s relative self-placement vis-à-vis the various parties on
those issues they associate with the parties. From this, we derive voter’s perceived party positions. For example, if a voter associates issue X with both party A and B, and indicates that he agrees completely with A but disagrees completely with party B, we can derive that this voter, on issue X, perceives A and B to be positioned on opposite ends on that issue. By extending this across all voters, all combinations of parties, and all issues, we obtain a large amount of perceived party positions on distinct issue dimension. We then apply weighted multidimensional scaling (WMDS) with a two-dimensional solution to obtain perceived party positions on two overarching dimensions: the left-right dimension and the GAL-TAN dimension. We used the amount of media attention for the various issues as weights in the WMDS, to make sure party positions on issues that get more attention in the media get weighted more heavily in determining parties’ position on the overall dimensions.

Finally, for H1b, H2b, and H3b, the dependent variable is Party’s Electoral Support expressed in the amount of seats the party obtained in the Dutch Lower House.

Operationalisation of Independent Variables

To test H1a, we construct Associative Issue Ownership according to the media (abbreviated AssocIO\textsubscript{media} hereafter) using the following formula:

\[
\text{AssocIO}_{ij}^{\text{media}} = \left(\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)} - \text{AvgPartyIssue}_{j}^{\text{media}(t)}\right) \times \left(\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t-1)} - \text{AvgPartyIssue}_{j}^{\text{media}(t-1)}\right) \times \left(\text{issuePosition}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t-1)} \times \text{issuePosition}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)}\right)
\]

\(\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)}\) is the proportion of party-issue statement statements in media coverage of the current campaign (t), in which party \(i\) takes a position on issue \(j\). We subtract the average proportion of party-issue statements (\(\text{AvgPartyIssue}_{j}^{\text{media}(t)}\)) from this, as it is important that the party is linked more to the issue compared to other parties. So the first part
calculates, for the current campaign (t) the surplus of associations a party has on an issue in media coverage. The second line then multiplies this with the party’s surplus in the previous campaign, as for H1a we are interested in the consistency of the parties’ issue associations over time: if a party only emphasizes an issue in the current campaign, but not in the previous campaign, this formula ensures that this yields a lower score than a party that emphasizes the issue in both the current and previous campaign. To avoid the situation where a negative surplus from the previous campaign (meaning that the party emphasized the issue less than other parties) would generate large negative scores for parties who then do emphasize the issue in the current campaign, we set the value of the surplus in the previous campaign to zero if the original value was negative.

Finally, the last line of the formula adds the requirement of positional consistency: we multiply the position of the party in the current campaign with the parties’ position in the previous campaign. Positions range from -1 (con) to +1 (pro). If the party holds the same position (e.g. pro an issue, coded as 1) in the current campaign and in the previous campaign, $AssocIO_{media}$ gets a positive sign ($1 \times 1 = 1$): we expect that a consistent position will increase the amount of associations. If, on the other hand, the party takes opposing positions ($-1 \times 1 = -1$) on an issue across campaigns, $AssocIO_{media}$ gets a negative sign $vi$.

To test H1b, we predict a parties’ vote share by the extent to which voters associate issues with the party, and agree with the party: $AssocIO_{i voters}$.

$$AssocIO_{i voters} = (PartyIssue_{ij voters(t)} - AvgPartyIssue_{j voters(t)}) \times (PartyIssue_{ij voters(t-1)} - AvgPartyIssue_{j voters(t-1)}) \times \sum_j (agree_{ij voters(t-1)} \times agree_{ij voters(t)})$$
Much in the same way as for associative issue ownership in the media, we calculate a parties’ surplus association on an issue (based on the proportion of voters associating the party with the issue), as compared to other parties and the previous campaign. To include the assumption that issue ownership matters especially given voter’s agreement with the party, we then multiply this with the proportion of voters that agrees with the party on the issue in the current \((t)\) and previous \((t-1)\) campaign. Then, this is aggregated across issues, so we arrive at a single measure of a parties’ associative issue ownership strength amongst voters \((\text{AssocIO}_i^{\text{voters}})\) which we use to predict the party’s vote share.

To test H2a, we predict whether a party’s convergence on dominant issues in the campaign increases voter’s associations between that party and issue, given that parties actually take different positions on the issue. To achieve this, we construct the following variable.

\[
\text{Convergence}_{ij}^{\text{media}} = \left( \text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)} \times \sum_i \text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)} \right) \times (\text{divgISSPos}_j^{\text{media}(t)})
\]

We first tally the proportion issue statements that link a party to an issue in the current campaign \((\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)})\), which we then multiply by the sum of the proportions for all parties on that issue \((\sum_i \text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{media}(t)})\). As such, strong associations on issues being discussed a lot by all parties results in a high value, whereas both weak associations on such issues and strong associations on irrelevant issues result in low values. Finally, we account for the requirement of positional conflict by multiplying this with the weighted standard error between parties’ positions on that issue \((\text{pro/con})\) in the media \((\text{divgISSPos}_j^{\text{media}(t)})\); the higher the standard error on positional placements, the greater the difference in parties’ positions.
H2b predicts a parties’ vote share by the strength of a party’s association with an issue on which voters perceive parties to have different positions. This is tested by

\[ \text{Convergence}_{i}^{\text{voters}}. \]

\[ \text{Convergence}_{i}^{\text{voters}} = \sum_{j} \left( (\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{voters}(t)} - \text{AvgPartyIssue}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)}) (\text{divgIssPos}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)}) \right) \]

The first part \( (\text{PartyIssue}_{ij}^{\text{voters}(t)} - \text{AvgPartyIssue}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)}) \) is identical to the associative issue ownership measure: voters should associate a party with an issue more than other parties in the current campaign. The second part \( (\text{divgIssPos}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)}) \) is included because we expect that a strong association to an issue only results in electoral gains if voters consider parties to take different positions on the issue: \( \text{divgIssPos}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)} \) contains the weighted standard deviation of voter’s agreement with the various parties on that issue. Thus, we use voter agreement here as a way to infer how voters perceive parties’ positions: larger standard deviations mean that voter’s perceptions of agreement with parties vary more – which means that they perceive parties to hold more different positions on the issue. By means of example, \( (\text{divgIssPos}_{j}^{\text{voters}(t)}) \) is at its maximum if there is one party with which all voters indicated that they agree, and another party with which all those same voters indicated that they disagree. Finally, we sum up all these party-issue measures to arrive at a single measure of party convergence, which we can use to predict a party’s vote share.

To test H3a, we construct \( \text{PartyPosition}^{\text{media}(t)} \) which tracks parties’ positions in the media on two dimensions (the left-right and GAL-TAN dimension). Constructing this variable takes several steps. First, for each election campaign we constructed a matrix containing, for each party and issue, the average position of the party – which varies between -1 (always con) to +1 (always pro). Secondly, across all elections, we used weighted multidimensional scaling (WMDS), with a two-dimensional solution in order to obtain
parties’ positions on the two dimensions. We used the amount of media attention for the various issues as weights in the WMDS, so that parties’ positions on issues that get greater emphasis in the media are weighted more heavily than their positions on less emphasized issues. Finally, we rotated the solution to ensure that the parties’ positions varied maximally on issues associated with the left-right. The results of this scaling procedure are then the positions of parties in the media, for a given campaign, on the left-right and GAL-TAN dimensions.

\textit{PerceivedProximity}^\text{voters} is the independent variable in H4b. We first calculate voter’s positions on the two dimensions. From this, we can calculate \( d_{ij} \): the distance between a voter (i) and a party (j), as the absolute difference between the position of the voter and the party. \textit{PerceivedProximity}^\text{voters} transforms this distance into a measure that also takes the distances between the voter and the \textit{other} parties into account. The reason we do this, is because absolute distances are not that important for voters when they calculate which party to vote for: what matters is how the voter’s distance to a given party compares to that voter’s distances to the other parties (see also our discussion of proximity theory). By choosing the closest party, the voter gains utility, but the more distant the other parties are, the higher the utility gain as choosing another party would mean a significant increase (Westholm, 1997). In our operationalization, we operationalize this idea using the formula below:

\[
\text{PerceivedProximity}^\text{voters} = \frac{1}{d_{ij}^2} \frac{1}{d_{ij}^2 + \sum_{k \neq j} \frac{1}{d_{ik}^2}}
\]

We divide the inverse quadratic distance between a voter and a party \( \frac{1}{d_{ij}^2} \) by that same inverse quadratic distance \( \frac{1}{d_{ij}^2} \) plus the sum of the inverse quadratic distances to the
other parties ($\sum_{k \neq j} \frac{1}{d_{ik}^2}$). This way, the larger the distances to other parties, the higher $PerceivedProximity_{voters}$ becomes. We use the quadratic distances, rather than the distances as such, to reflect a multiparty party system in which parties who are close to a voter but still more distant than another party have a reduced chance, but still a chance, to get elected. With quadratic distances a voter with distances 1, 2 and 3 to three parties would arrive at proximity based vote probabilities of 73%, 18% and 8% respectively.

We use regression analysis to test each of the hypotheses separately. The lagged dependent variable is included in each regression equation as an independent variable as we are interested in changes in voter’s attitudes (H1a, H2a, H3a) and parties’ vote shares (H1b, H2b, H3b). Each variable was standardized ($z$-scores) to enable a comparison of the strength of regression coefficients. Finally, we use panel-corrected standard errors in all models we estimate.

**Results**

We focus on the key independent variable per model, and the explained variance of the model ($R^2$). Our models always include two independent variables: the lagged dependent variable, and the variable of interest which evaluates the hypothesis. We use *standardized* regression coefficients to enable a direct comparison of the strength of the various independent variables. Table 2 presents the results. Columns 4 and 5 are most important, as they report the model results for the independent variable of interest. Column 4 reports the unstandardized coefficient, whereas column 5 offers a brief description of the independent variable of interest.

<Table 2 around here>
Starting with issue ownership, both H1a and H1b get clear support from our data. On the one hand, when parties are more associated with an issue in the media, relative to other parties and the previous campaign, voters associate them more with the issue (0.17 (0.02), p<.001) – provided that they keep their position consistent compared to the previous campaign. In turn, the expectation that stronger party-issue associations on dominant campaign issues, given voter’s agreement with the party’s position on these issues, also finds support in our data.

The data also lend support to the hypotheses about issue convergence. When media coverage shows that a party converges on a dominant campaign issue on which parties’ opinions vary, voters associate it more with that issue (0.14 (0.04), p < .01). H2a is confirmed. We also tested what would happen if we left out the requirement that parties actually took different positions on the issues in the media. As expected, this operationalization of convergence performed worse in predicting voter’s party-issue associations (p < .05). Our second issue convergence expectation was that stronger party-issue associations on issues where voters perceive parties to take different positions would result in more seats. This expectation gets confirmation (0.42 (0.08), p < .001), supporting H2b. Moreover, as the dependent variables in the issue ownership and convergence models are identical, we can compare the explained variance: for the impact of media on voter’s attitudes issue ownership seems to be slightly more performant, but in predicting the impact of voter’s attitudes on electoral outcomes the issue convergence model seems to offer a slightly better explanation.

Finally, the last two lines of Table 2 test our propositions regarding the proximity model. The data also offer support for proximity based spatial voting. Media coverage of parties’ positions on the left-right dimension and the GAL-TAN dimension affects voter’s perceived positions of parties (0.32 (0.07), p < .001), on top of their previously perceived
positions (0.55 (0.09), p < .001). Thus, voters become aware of the strategic shifts in the issue positions of parties that are reported in the media. Most importantly, the perceived positions of parties have a tangible electoral impact: the proximity between perceived party positions and voter’s own positions in the current campaign affects parties’ electoral results (0.26 (0.11), p < .05).

When we compare the three approaches to issue voting, our findings seem to suggest that overall, issue convergence outperforms issue ownership, which in turn outperforms spatial proximity. Yet, these results are aggregated across all parties, for all the elections we have at our disposal. To test whether these findings are robust, we examine the explanatory power of the three models for each party’s election result separately. Figure 1 presents a straightforward comparison of the number of seats in Parliament (in black) with predictions of the number of seats in line with issue convergence (green), spatial proximity (blue) and issue ownership (red). The different panes of figure 1 show the predictions for the six political parties which gathered the highest number of seats in the 1998-2012 period. Note that the issue ownership predictions start in 2002 rather than in 1998: as our operationalization of issue ownership takes account of parties’ ownership in the previous election, the 1998 data had to be included in the 2002 issue ownership predictions.

Though the three models overall performed quite well in predicting electoral outcomes, figure 1 shows substantial variation in how well the models are able to predict parties’ electoral gains and losses between campaigns, suggesting that for some parties, different models work better. For the two left-wing parties PvdA and SP, issue ownership seems to be best at predicting the upward and downward shifts most accurately. For CDA, convergence tracks the shifts in seats best, and convergence also performs well for D66
(except for the 2002 loss) and VVD. The 2012 electoral win by VVD and the 2002 win by SP are not predicted by any of the models. Issue ownership and issue convergence predict the victory of the VVD in 2010, but both theories fail to predict that the VVD of incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte would win once more in 2012.

Yet, one of the most interesting cases is LPF/PVV (bottom right pane): all models perform quite well. But though the proximity model seemed to perform worse overall, it is very accurate in this case, especially for the 2010 win. Indeed, positional shifts were an important aspect of the 2010 win for this party: our media analysis shows that in 2010 the PVV shifted to a centrist position on the left-right, which brought it closer to a large part of the electorate. In this instance, issue ownership fails to predict the LPF/PVV’s substantial seat gain: issue ownership rewards consistency, but the 2010 win of PVV was not a result of its consistency. In fact, PVV did something quite inconsistent. But that inconsistency brought it closer, or proximate, to voters. Proximity theory accounts for this important aspect of parties’ electoral strategies, and pretty accurately predicts the electoral impact of the position shift.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

To what extent do issue ownership (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996), issue convergence (Sigelman & Buell, 2004) or spatial proximity (Downs, 1957; Westholm, 1997) explain parties’ electoral results? We developed a theoretical framework to understand the two-step process that translates parties’ communication during campaigns into tangible electoral results. We argue that parties’ attention to issues in the media first affects voter’s attitudes – both in terms of the issues they spontaneously link to parties, and in terms of how they perceive parties’ positions on these issues. In turn, these attitudes then drive voter’s actual electoral behaviour. Moreover, our framework addressed the assumptions that the two saliency approaches to issue voting make regarding parties’ positions, and the role of salience
for proximity-based models of issue voting. This resulted in two hypotheses for each model. We evaluated these hypotheses using unusually rich data gathered in the run up to the Dutch national elections over a 14-year period (1998-2012), linking an extensive media content analysis data to survey data tracking voter’s attitudes and parties’ actual amount of seats obtained.

By and large, the results suggest that all three models have merit to understand how campaigns affect voter’s issue perceptions, and how these perceptions then affect the electoral fates of political parties. That said, we find that across elections and parties, saliency approaches outperform the spatial model in explaining the vote shares that parties obtain. Issue convergence theory gained the strongest support in our data, at least insofar as predicting voting outcomes was concerned (Damore, 2005; Sigelman & Buell, 2004). We find that when parties address the same issues, but also take divergent issue positions on these issues, this increases the extent to which voters associate them with these issues. In turn, the more voters associate a party with issues on which they perceive parties’ to take different positions, the greater the amount of seats this party obtains. Issue ownership theory also received support: assuming that parties keep their positions constant, voter’s associations between parties and issues increase when parties consistently emphasize issues more than their competitors and compared to the previous campaign. Moreover, stronger party-issue associations increase the amount of seats obtained by parties. Finally, the expectations form proximity theory also received confirmation in our data: media coverage of party issue positions affects how voters perceive these positions. Conversely, as more voters perceive their own position to be closer to a certain party (compared to the other parties), this party will gain more seats in parliament.

Perhaps most interestingly, we also examined the extent to which the model’s ability to predict the electoral outcome varied across parties and campaigns. Though overall saliency
approaches outperformed the proximity approach, we find that incorrect predictions of both theories are associated with strategic shifts of the parties’ issue positions in the political space, for example with the 2010 shifts on the left-right axis of the PVV to a more leftist position, putting it closer to the centrist CDA. It is precisely in these cases involving strategic position shifts that spatial proximity theory is able to explain the election outcomes most accurately.

The research results suggest that an integrated theory of issue competition can be built from successful components of issue ownership theory (e.g. more media attention for issues than competing parties for issues that were more newsworthy than in the previous campaign), issue convergence theory (e.g. discussion, debate and disagreement between parties according to media and voters) and spatial proximity theory (e.g. reckoning with the relative proximity of both voters and electoral competitors). Our argument extends prior calls for theoretical integration by Green and Hobolt (2008) and Sanders et al. (2011), arguing that an integrated theory of party competition should incorporate elements from spatial theories (Kriesi et al., 2008; Laver & Sergenti, 2012; Muis, 2009).

A limitation of our study specifically and most studies on issue voting in general is the level of abstraction. Our analysis was limited to 13 issues that were relevant in all campaigns we studied here, and smaller issues were hence aggregated into these 13 ‘overarching’ issues. One robustness test showed that splitting up issues and the inclusion of campaign-specific issues weakened the effects, but all but one remained significant. Future work should also consider different electoral systems. For example, does the issue owner in a majoritarian party system leave enough crumbs for his opponents as in the case of the issue owner in a multiparty system – as indicated by the explanatory power of positional conflict with regard to issues on which the parties converge? In which political systems will issue owners benefit especially from more media attention for their issues than in the previous campaign and in which political systems will they benefit from more media attention for their issues than their
political competitors? We leave it to future work to tackle these questions: our aim was to test to what extent three of the major theories on issue voting hold up when compared directly. If anything, our findings indicate that all theories offer distinct and complimentary views on issue voting, that when integrated into a single theory would provide an encompassing understanding of the impact of parties’ issue competition on electoral results.
References


doi:10.1016/S0261-3794(02)00061-6


doi:10.1023/A:1022616323373

doi:10.1007/s11109-005-3077-6


Table 1: Overview of hypotheses, per model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Media Coverage</th>
<th>Voter Perceptions</th>
<th>Electoral Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue Ownership</td>
<td>Stronger association between party and issue (compared to other parties and prior campaign) and party takes consistent position.</td>
<td>More voters associate party with issue. H1a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More voters associate party with issue, and agree with party on issue. H1b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>In the media, party is strongly associated with dominant issue in the campaign and parties take differing positions on issue.</td>
<td>More voters associate party with issues on which there is positional conflict. H2a</td>
<td>H2b Greater Electoral Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More voters associate party with important issue, and on which they perceive parties to take different positions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>In the media, parties’ issue positions on overarching dimensions get more attention. H3a</td>
<td>Voter’s perceptions of parties’ position on overarching dimension reflect media coverage of position.</td>
<td>H3b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distance between voter’s own position and parties’ perceived position on overarching dimensions is smaller.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Results of Regression Models implementing Issue Ownership, Issue Convergence and Issue Proximity Propositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Lagged Dependent</th>
<th>Independent Variable of Interest</th>
<th>Description Independent Variable of Interest</th>
<th>$R_{adj}^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1a: Voter’s party issue association</td>
<td>0.70*** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.17*** (0.02)</td>
<td>$\text{AssocIO}_{ij}^{\text{media}}$</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1b: Amount of seats for party</td>
<td>0.68*** (0.12)</td>
<td>0.32* (0.12)</td>
<td>$\text{AssocIO}_{i}^{\text{voters}}$</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2a: Voter’s party issue association</td>
<td>0.70*** (0.06)</td>
<td>0.14** (0.04)</td>
<td>$\text{Convergence}_{ij}^{\text{media}}$</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2b: Amount of seats for party</td>
<td>0.64*** (0.10)</td>
<td>0.42*** (0.08)</td>
<td>$\text{Convergence}_{i}^{\text{voters}}$</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3a: Voter’s perceived position party</td>
<td>0.55*** (0.09)</td>
<td>0.32*** (0.07)</td>
<td>$\text{PartyPosition}_{ij}^{\text{media}}$</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3b: Amount of seats for party</td>
<td>0.71*** (0.11)</td>
<td>0.26* (0.11)</td>
<td>$\text{PerceivedProximity}_{i}^{\text{voters}}$</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: OLS regression coefficients are based on standardized variables with Panel-Corrected Standard Errors (in brackets). * = p<0.05, ** = p<0.01, *** = p<0.001 (two-sided tests).
Figure 1: Parliamentary Seats predicted by Issue Ownership, Issue Convergence and Issue Proximity

Note: To enable a visual comparison across parties and across election years, a linear minimum-median transformation was applied to issue ownership and issue convergence variables to prevent a negative number of predicted seats but to allow for positive outliers in predictions.
Various authors do examine media content in this regard, e.g. Budge & Farlie, 1983 examine media content rather than actual party communications.

By means of example, a voter that has a distance of 1 to party A and 1.01 to party B, prefers party A over B, but only decreases his distance by .01 in choosing party A. If the voter has a distance of 2 to party B, the voter decreases his distance more (1) by preferring A over B, which increases the chances he will end up choosing A. As such, the electoral benefits of taking a position close to a voter depend also on the distance of that voter to other parties.

Insufficient survey data were available in 2002 for LN (Livable Netherlands) in 2002, in 1998 for the CD (Centre Democrats), the SGP and the Christian Union, and in 2012 for 50+. None of these parties obtained more than five seats in the Dutch Parliament. The LPF and the PVV entered parliament in 2002, respectively 2006. The LPF was dissolved before 2006. The PvdD entered Parliament in 2010.

The coded media included five national daily newspapers (AD, NRC Handelsblad, Trouw, De Telegraaf, de Volkskrant), two free daily newspapers (Spits, Metro) and prime time television news for the main public (NOS) and commercial (RTL4, SBS6) broadcasters.

Each content analysis measure at the aggregate level is based on the content of the media to which individual media consumers were exposed based on their answers to questions about the use of specific newspapers and television news magazines. For each respondent, a personal news package was constructed. To illustrate, a voter who reads a newspaper NP4 with 7 statements on a specific party-issue pair and watches television news programme TV1 with 3 statements on the same pair will receive a 10, which will be divided by the sum of all statements about all party-issue pairs in his or her personal news package, to arrive at a measure of relative attention for this party-issue pair. Issue positions in different media are combined with the formula for weighted sums, weighted means and weighted variances to arrive at measures of the total direction, the (averaged) issue position of a party with regard to an issue and the divergence of issue positions across parties.

For new parties, the parties’ previous position was set as identical to the current campaign, but we divided the positional component by 2, which essentially halves the AssocIO\textsubscript{media} measure for new parties. Our reasoning for this is that new parties have no prior reputation on an issue, so we apply a penalty for new parties in this manner.