Issue Ownership: More than Just Party Identification?*

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Abstract

This article investigates the sources of individual perceptions of party competence. Classical issue ownership theory states that individual party competence evaluation stems from a party’s history of attention on a given issue (e.g. Petrocik 1996). Critics argue that party competence evaluation is little more than a product of party identification. Against the backdrop of this academic dispute, we investigate the factors influencing individuals’ perception of issue ownership. Drawing on data from post-electoral studies and on the Manifesto Project Database, we look at how partisanship and parties’ attention to issues influence voters’ competence evaluations. Adopting a comparative research design, we test our model for 20 OECD countries. The results show that issue ownership perceptions derive from both individual party identification as well as parties’ issue emphasis. Thus, viewing party competence as a mere expression of party ties is too simplistic.

Keywords: issue ownership, competence, manifesto, issue, partisanship

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Introduction

Issue ownership theory is a fast-growing field in political research. Since the founding of salience theory by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik’s ground-breaking article (Petrocik 1996), numerous studies look at how issue ownership influences the vote choice at the individual level or party behaviour and success at the party level. Despite their many different approaches to issue ownership, scholars working in this field agree with the idea that issues play a central role for voters and parties. Walgrave et al. (2015: p.778; see also p.780) suggest that a broadly accepted conceptualisation of issue ownership could roughly refer to “[…] the link between specific parties and issues in the minds of voters”.

However, the specificity of this link is challenged in literature. While the classic conception of issue ownership theory foresees that a party’s emphasis of a given issue determines if voters deem it competent on this issue, critics argue that party identification explains which party a voter thinks is competent. Bypassing the importance of issues, these critics consider competence to be a mere reflection of partisanship: “Competence is likely to be strongly affected by party preference and therefore a tricky predictor of voting behaviour” (Walgrave et al. 2015). Parallel to the flourishing literature on issue ownership, where competence ownership is widely used (e.g. Meyer and Mueller 2013; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014), most post-election surveys nowadays contain questions on parties’ issue competence (Wagner and Zeglovits 2014). From an issue ownership perspective, therefore, the fact that issue ownership perceptions could be solely influenced by partisanship is very problematic: does the attention, which parties pay to certain issues, not influence the perception of their competence on these issues at all? And even if individual competence perception was influenced by party identification, how could you explain that voters without any party identification still attribute issue ownership to a certain party? We think that it is more important than ever to get a better understanding of the sources of issue ownership in order to be able to continue to estimate and predict its effects.

Our aim in this paper is therefore to assess how much of a voter’s competence ownership perception can be explained by partisanship, and how much by a party’s attention to a specific issue. Thus far, the great majority of publications on issue ownership are interested in issue
ownership voting, i.e. how issue ownership perceptions influence the vote choice. In contrast, the origins of issue ownership perception at the individual level have not been analyzed extensively (Walgrave et al. 2015: p.790), with the exception of Stubager and Slothuus (2013), who analyze the case of Denmark. Comparing 20 OECD countries, we combine CSES data on voters and CMP data on parties’ issue emphasis. Our results show that competence evaluations are, more often than not, more than just a reflection of partisanship.

Sources of competence ownership

In the following sections, we will briefly define the key concepts and explain the basic mechanisms, which are at work for individual competence evaluations.

What is competence ownership?

Despite the variety of approaches, scholars working on issue ownership voting understand it as voting based on perceptions about a party’s competence to handle important issues. The basic idea behind issue ownership voting is a three-step mechanism. First, it foresees that a voter is worried about a certain issue more than about others. In a second step, the voter assesses how competently parties can handle the further in order to choose the party best able to handle her most important issue. Competence ownership therefore refers to voters’ perception regarding a party’s competence to deal with an issue. The third and final step consists of the vote choice based on this evaluation. Recent studies oppose competence ownership to associative ownership, which is the link voters spontaneously make between an issue and a specific party, whithout necessarily believing that this party offers the best solutions to the problem (Bellucci 2006; Walgrave et al. 2012; Tresch et al. 2015; Walgrave et al. 2014; Lachat 2014; Kleinnijenhuis and Walter 2014). For Walgrave et al. (2015), competence and association are two different dimensions of issue ownership, which often are not seperated clearly enough. Associative and competence ownership have different incidents on vote choice. While associative ownership does not have a direct effect on the vote (Walgrave et al. 2015, 2014; Lachat 2014), party choice is

1 Party competence voting is therefore used as a synonym to issue ownership voting.
influenced by competence ownership (e.g. Nadeau et al. 2001; Bellucci 2006; Green and Hobolt 2008; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Lachat 2011, 2014; Lanz 2012; Meyer and Mueller 2013).

In this article, we are interested in the causes of a voter’s perception of competence ownership. From a theoretical perspective, competence ownership is more prone to be influenced by partisanship than associative ownership. It is indeed likely that a voter would choose the party she identifies with as best able to handle her most important problem. However, she could still spontaneously think of another party which deals with the same issue. In this sense, choosing competence over association is a harder test for our hypothesis predicting that other factors than partisanship influence ownership perceptions. From a methodological point of view, survey questions measuring competence ownership are more broadly available and more easily comparable than questions measuring associative ownership.

The classic conception: competence as issue emphasis

In his seminal work on issue-ownership voting, Petrocik (1996) claims that competence ownership comes from a party’s or candidate’s reputation of handling certain issues. According to Green and Hobolt (2008: p.462) this notion of handling is at the very core of issue ownership theory. A reputation of handling issues is “[...] produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems [...]” (Petrocik 1996: p.826). A party’s history of attention is largely shaped by the link between the party and its constituency, as well as by its performances while in office (Petrocik 1996: p.827). Firstly, constituency based ownership heavily leans on cleavage literature (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The basic claim is that “parties have sociologically distinctive constituencies and the linkage between a party’s issue agenda and the social characteristics of its supporters is quite strong” (Petrocik 1996: p.828). A party therefore owns certain issues for ideological and historical reasons, which are not dependent on competence evaluations primarily. In their comparison of four possible sources of competence ownership, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) look at constituency-linked issue ownership. Based on a case study of the two majors parties on two issues in Denmark, they find a considerable impact of the constituency on issue ownership. However, these results may depend on their measure of constituency. Instead of
measuring the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on competence ownership, they ask voters which party best represents a certain socio-economic segment of society (Stubager and Slothuus 2013). In our opinion, this measure captures the perception of the links between the parties and their constituencies rather than preference for a party based on an individual’s belonging to a specific constituency. The second factor shaping a party’s history of attention is the record of the incumbent. This record can lead to an advantage of the challenger party if the incumbent does not match up to voters’ expectations. In their analysis, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) find that the perception of real-world party performances influence the ownership evaluation of government. However, since the study only includes one election, it is difficult to say whether the observed effect is more than a mere assessment of government performance. In short, performance evaluations contribute to issue ownership attribution. Specifically, parties’ performance on certain issues may be under more public scrutiny than their conduct of other affairs. For Petrocik et al. (2003), issues such as the economy, the conduct of foreign relations and the functioning of government are typical performance issues. This clearly resonates with the literature on economic voting, which states that voters evaluate parties according to their performance on economic issues (Anderson 2007; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Powell and Whitten 1993).

In his recently published critical review of over 50 years of salience theory, Budge (2015: p.770) summarizes the classical conception of the origins of issue ownership as follows: “Parties are thus tied to certain issues by their origin and record.” In Petrocik’s view, competence ownership is rather long-lasting and has a tendency to be reinforced when a party further highlights its issue during campaigns (Petrocik 1996: p. 826). In other words, a party maintains and increases its reputation to handle a certain issue by emphasizing it. Selective emphasis not only reinforces the link between the party and its issue, it is also an attempt to dominate the public agenda during election campaigns. Scholars studying problem emphasis find that candidates and parties strategically underline issues that are beneficial to them and their party and hurt their political opponents (Sellers 1998; Simon 2002; Petrocik et al. 2003; Hayes 2005; Green-Pedersen 2007).
For political parties, issue salience combined with strong competence perceptions, may lead to electoral success (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996).

In the literature on issue ownership, emphasis is retained as the single most important determinant of issue ownership (e.g. Budge and Farlie 1983; Meguid 2005; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2014). As Budge (2015: p.771) states, “ownership’ implies establishing a reputation for greater competence and concern for certain issues by *emphasising* them more.” The more a party communicates on an issue, the more likely it is to become and stay issue owner of this problem.

**Critique: a reflection of party identification**

Apart from a party’s reputation of handling a certain issue, competence perception might simply stem from a voter’s party identification. Following Campbell et al. (1960: p.121), *party identification* is usually understood as “[...] the individual’s affective orientation [...]” to a party. Developed during childhood socialization, party identification is imperatively prior to competence evaluations, and can influence the latter. Voters having an affective tie to a party are expected to be biased in their competence evaluations in at least two ways. On the one hand, voters with a strong identification for a party may automatically attribute competence ownership to that party. Indeed, many studies show that voters identifying with a party have a tendency to name their own preferred party as competent on their most important problem (Bélanger and Meguid 2008). In their assessment of survey questions about party competence, Wagner and Zeglovits (2014) find that respondents would adapt their answers to questions regarding competence ownership according to their party identification. The lack of information and opinions on issue-specific questions leads voters to use their partisan heuristic to determine which party they deem most competent (Wagner and Zeglovits 2014). On the other hand, the issue considered most important by these voters is probably the one owned by the party they identify with. Petrocik (1996) is already concerned by the fact that issue ownership might be a reflection of partisanship. He concedes that, in general, Republican identifiers have other issue priorities

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3 Emphasis added.
4 For a different conception of party identification see Fiorina (1981).
than Democratic identifiers (Petrocik 1996: p.844). Competence ownership, therefore, is strongly influenced by partisanship (Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Kuechler 1991). However, partisanship can impossibly explain issue agendas and competence evaluations of voters who do not have any party identification. In times where partisanship is on the decline (e.g. Dalton 2002; Franklin 1985), it is more than ever pivotal to investigate how voters without party identification assign issue ownership.\footnote{In our dataset, 39 percent of the respondents do not feel close to any political party.} Party identification is thus unlikely to be the only determinant of competence ownership perceptions.

Furthermore, certain authors have claimed that competence evaluations are dependent on voters’ values (Stubager and Slothuus 2013). However, the results are rather confusing, with attitudes on different issues influencing competence ownership perceptions to different extents. Stubager and Slothuus claim that attitudes and partisanship influence ownership perceptions through an emotional mechanism (Stubager and Slothuus 2013: p.569). In line with Kuechler (1991), they consider attitudes and party identification to be “affective bonds” and “ideological beliefs” causing an emotional preference for a party. Asked about which party they consider to be most competent to solve their most pressing problem, voters choose the party they feel closest to (Stubager and Slothuus 2013: p.569). While we agree with the claim that partisanship translates into an affective bond to a party, we consider attitude preferences to resonate with the premises of proximity voting (Merril and Grofman 1999). The closer a voter’s opinions are to a party’s position on a certain issue, the higher the chances that she will vote for this party. In this sense, the fact that a voter holds certain preconceived attitudes is not contrary to the logic of issue ownership attribution.

**Hypotheses**

Leaning on the extant literature cited above, we hypothesize that partisanship is a strong determinant of competence ownership perceptions.

**Hypothesis 1** If a voter feels close to a specific party, she is likely to consider this party most competent.
However, competence ownership is not a mere reflection of partisanship. According to the classic conception of issue ownership, we therefore hypothesize that issue emphasis of the party influences competence ownership.

**Hypothesis 2** A voter judges a party to be more competent than other parties to solve her most important problem if the party in question emphasizes this issue more than other parties.

Issue emphasis might have a stronger impact on voters without any attachment to a party. For identifiers, the fact that their preferred party raises their most important problem might not further increase their probability to find this party competent.

**Hypothesis 2.a** For voters who identify with a party, the above-mentioned effect is less strong than for non-identifiers.

Voters’ perception of competence might be influenced by issue emphasis for most issues, but for economic issues emphasis might not be as important as performance evaluations.

**Hypothesis 2.b** For economic issues, the above-mentioned effect is less strong than for other issues.

**Data, Case Selection and Method**

**Data and case selection**

Data for this analysis comes from two different sources. First, we use the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES).\(^6\) We build on the third module which includes election surveys from 2006 to 2011. In addition to standard sociodemographic questions, the CSES includes measures for the most pressing problem (MIP) and party competence.\(^7\)

Second, to assess the parties’ issue attention we use the Comparative Manifesto Project Database (CMP) which is based on a content analysis of party programs.\(^8\) CMP data has been criticized for a number of reasons, notably for not producing a reliable left-right measure of party

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\(^6\)Data available at: http://www.cses.org/.

\(^7\)The more recent CSES module (2011-2016) does not include these indicators.

\(^8\)Data available at: https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/.
positions (McDonald and Mendes 2001). However, it is commonly used to measure parties’ issue emphasis (Ward et al. 2015) since it produces a rather reliable measure of “the relative emphasis parties give to the different messages they wish to transmit to electors” (Klingemann et al. 2006). Moreover, it allows a comparison of issue attention of different countries.

All countries included in this study are member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and are labelled full democracies on Freedom House and Polity IV.\textsuperscript{9} 20 countries fulfil these criteria and are included in the CSES and the CMP projects.\textsuperscript{10}

Our statistical models are fairly demanding with regard to the number of observations. We hence exclude voters who indicate a small party as most competent. Small parties are those which are considered competent by less than ten percent of the respondents in a country.

**Operationalization**

Our outcome variable is the individual *evaluation of party competence*. In the survey, respondents first have to select the most important problem the country is facing. In a second step participants indicate the most competent party for this problem: “which [party] do you think is best in dealing with [MIP]”? While this variable is widely used in electoral research (e.g. Clarke et al. 2009; Lachat 2011; Pardos-Prado 2012), critics have proposed other measures for competence ownership.\textsuperscript{11} However, none of these measures is available for several countries, which makes a comparative approach impossible.

*Party identification* is measured with a standard question asking if the respondent feels close to any particular party. In the empirical model we introduce a dummy for each party, which was big enough not be excluded from the outcome variable. We add a dummy for the voters who identify with another party. The reference group are voters who do not feel close to any particular party.

\textsuperscript{9}We used the scores for the respective year of the election.
\textsuperscript{10}Data on Greece and Slovenia is also available. We exclude these countries due to low numbers of observations on our dependent variable. Ireland is excluded because information on the respondents’ most pressing problem was not available.
\textsuperscript{11}For a full account of the disagreements on conceptualization and measurement in issue ownership literature see Walgrave et al. (2015).
The second input variable reflects party attention to a given issue. Each respondent is assigned the share of attention the parties pay to the issue she considers most pressing. The variable party attention is hence contingent of the respondent’s MIP. In order to match the CMP attention scores with the respondent’s MIP, issues had to be recoded. We recoded the most pressing issues into seven categories: Social policy, international relations, public services and administration, economy, immigration, inner security, environment and other quality of live issues. A residual category that we exclude from the analysis captures mostly country specific issues. This systematic categorization enables us to compare the results across all countries in the analysis. For the categorization of issues we follow Roller (1998) and Giger (2011). The same categories are used to recode party attention in the CMP database. While the coding is straight forward in most cases, the CMP is problematic when it comes to estimating party positions on immigration. The available codes often confound immigration issues with other political issues (Ruedin 2013).

**Empirical model**

To model our outcome, we rely on a multilevel analysis performed on a stacked data matrix including all 20 countries (for a similar approach see Walgrave et al. 2012; Kroh 2009; van der Eijk et al. 1996; Westholm 1997; MacDonald et al. 1991). In this matrix observations correspond to respondents × party combinations. We are not interested in differential effects of issue attention between parties. The transformation of the data is an ideal strategy to estimate models across all parties in a given country. Our dependent variable is binary taking the value 1 if respondent $j$ of country $k$ considered party $i$ competent. For all other observations of $j$ the outcome variable is 0. For observation $(k, j, i)$ the party attention variable measures the attention party $i$ dedicates to $j$’s MIP. Party identification on observation $(k, j, i)$ is 1 when the respondent identifies with party $i$. If a respondent does not feel close to any party, she has the value 0 on all observations.

Our statistical model has to account for the multiplication of individuals by the number of

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12 Other than Giger (2011) who codes unemployment as social policy issue we label it as economic issue.

13 Multiculturalism: positive (per607); multiculturalism: negative (per608); underprivileged minority groups (per705).
parties and the fact that we estimate effects across all countries (Steenbergen and Jones 2002).
We thus estimate random intercept logistic regressions where observations are grouped in each
individual and individuals are grouped in the countries. The full empirical model can be specified
as follows:

\[
Pr(y_{ijk} = 1) = \logit^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 partisan_i + \beta_2 attention_i + \beta_3 - 5X_i + \mu_0j + \phi_0k)
\]

Where we estimate the probability that respondent \( j \) of country \( k \) chooses party \( i \) as the most
competent. \( \beta_0 \) is a global average for a party to be considered competent. \( partisan_i \) is a
dummy measuring party identification. \( attention_i \) measures the attention party \( i \) dedicates to
the MIP in the party manifesto. \( X_i \) is a vector for the control variables gender, age and education.
\( \mu_0j \) and \( \phi_0k \) cover respondent-dependent and country-dependent differences respectively.

Due to the non-linearity of the logistic curve, regression coefficients in logistic models are
difficult to grasp. In the empirical section we thus rely on predicted probabilities and first
differences (FD). In our case first differences show how much the probability of considering a
party competent changes as a function of a change in party identification or party attention (King
et al. 2000). This is done in four steps: First, we set our explanatory variables to their median.
The variable of interest “party identification” or “issue attention” is fixed on its minimum (e.g.
no party identification or low issue attention). With these initial settings (\( Z_s \)) we calculate the
probability to consider a party competent (\( Pr(\tilde{y}_s = 1) \)). In a second step we set the values of
the context variable on its maximum (\( Z_c \)) and approximate \( Pr(\tilde{y}_c = 1) \). Third, we estimate the
difference between the two predicted probabilities (\( Pr(\tilde{y}_s = 1) \)) and (\( Pr(\tilde{y}_c = 1) \)). By repeating
this algorithm 1’500 times we compute the first difference. Finally, we cut the lowest and highest
2.5 percent of the simulated values to approximate the 95 percent confidence interval.
Table 1: Hierarchical logistic regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outcome variable: competence</th>
<th>(0)</th>
<th>(1a)</th>
<th>(1b)</th>
<th>(2a)</th>
<th>(2b)</th>
<th>(3a)</th>
<th>(3b)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>All issues</td>
<td>Economic issues</td>
<td>Social issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partisanship (no)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partisanship (no)</td>
<td>3.305***</td>
<td>3.317***</td>
<td>3.359***</td>
<td>3.725***</td>
<td>3.870***</td>
<td>3.220***</td>
<td>5.485***</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
<td>(0.065)</td>
<td>(0.052)</td>
<td>(0.182)</td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
<td>(0.210)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Issue attention</td>
<td>0.015***</td>
<td>0.015***</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.047***</td>
<td>0.065***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
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<td>(0.004)</td>
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<td>Sex (male)</td>
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<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
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<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
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<td>(0.059)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.003***</td>
<td>-0.003***</td>
<td>-0.003***</td>
<td>-0.006***</td>
<td>-0.006***</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
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<td>(0.002)</td>
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<td>Education (low)</td>
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<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.089</td>
<td>-0.089</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
<td>(0.067)</td>
<td>(0.068)</td>
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<td>Partisanship × attention</td>
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<td>-0.005</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>-2.534***</td>
<td>-2.005***</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.153)</td>
<td>(0.160)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.433***</td>
<td>-1.777***</td>
<td>-1.786***</td>
<td>-1.676***</td>
<td>-1.703***</td>
<td>-2.534***</td>
<td>-2.005***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.070)</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.120)</td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
<td>(0.153)</td>
<td>(0.160)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Observations</td>
<td>42,149</td>
<td>42,149</td>
<td>42,149</td>
<td>18,975</td>
<td>18,975</td>
<td>8,401</td>
<td>8,401</td>
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<td>Individuals</td>
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<td>14,497</td>
<td>14,497</td>
<td>7,117</td>
<td>7,117</td>
<td>2,698</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Countries</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-18,959.310</td>
<td>-18,877.610</td>
<td>-18,877.330</td>
<td>-8,060.346</td>
<td>-8,060.002</td>
<td>-3,800.983</td>
<td>-3,728.403</td>
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<td>Akaike Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>37,932.620</td>
<td>37,771.210</td>
<td>37,772.660</td>
<td>16,136.690</td>
<td>16,138.000</td>
<td>7,617.966</td>
<td>7,474.807</td>
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<td>Bayesian Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>37,993.160</td>
<td>37,840.410</td>
<td>37,850.500</td>
<td>16,199.500</td>
<td>16,208.660</td>
<td>7,674.254</td>
<td>7,538.132</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Empirical results

In a first step we investigate to what extent partisanship influences issue ownership on the most pressing problem. To this end we estimate a basic model with party identification as predictor for competence (model 0, table 1). The positive effect of partisanship shows that partisans are more likely to consider their party competent than voters who do not feel close to this party. In the basic model, as well as in all other models estimated, the effect of partisanship is significant on the 0.001-level. To assess the strength of the effect we estimate first differences. Partisans are 67 percentage points more likely to consider their party competent than non-partisans. This result provides ample support for our first hypothesis. However, at the same time it should not be overstated. Closeness to a party can only determine issue ownership if the voter feels close to a party.

In a second step we introduce issue attention as an additional explanation of issue competence. This additional estimate decreases the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) which indicates a better model fit. In other words, issue attention contributes to the explanation of issue ownership. The coefficient in table 1 is positive and significant which means that attention increases ownership. For the strength of the effect we turn to graphical presentation. The right panel in figure 1 displays the probability of assigning competence to a party across different levels of issue emphasis in the manifesto.

The first differences in the chart show a simulated change of attention from its minimum to its maximum ($\Delta_{mm}$). The curve in the chart shows that issue ownership is more likely the more a party is concerned with an issue. If a party is not at all invested in an issue, chances are low that it is regarded as competent on this topic. If the attention is maximal, the party is 19 percentage points more likely to be considered competent. Since the range of attention across issues and countries is large, we additionally report the FD when attention changes two standard deviations ($\Delta_{sd}$). If we consider this range, the change in probability is a more modest five percentage points. This result supports our claim that issue attention affects issue ownership. However, the strength of the effect is relatively modest. In order to gain only little more ownership, parties would have to go through substantial changes in their issue attention.
So far we have analysed competence across all seven issues. This might however be too simplistic. With regard to the economy, the literature suggests that issue ownership is rather driven by performance than attention (e.g. Petrocik 1996). In order to test this we estimated separate models for economic issues and the social issues. Across all 20 countries in our analysis these were by far the most pressing issues.

Model 2a in the regression only includes voters who consider the economy to be the top priority. The estimator for issue attention is positive but not significant on the 0.05 level. The visualization in the middle panel of figure 1 confirms that for economy, attention has virtually no impact on competence. Even a substantial change of attention does not yield higher chances to be regarded as the competent party.

This is in sharp contrast to the findings of model 3a which only includes social issues. The effect is positive and highly significant. The visualization of the effects (right panel in figure 1) shows that emphasising social issues is highly rewarding. Chances are low to be regarded as competent when a party does not deal with the issue. If a party’s attention to this issue is maximal, the probability is a striking 32 percentage points higher. A change of two standard deviations in attention (which equals 18 percentage points more attention) means that the probability to
be regarded as competent increases by 14 percentage points. Put differently, every additional percentage point of emphasis in the manifesto increases the probability of ownership by almost a percentage point.

These results indicate that issue ownership has multiple sources depending on the issue at stake. Competence on economic issues is determined differently than competence on social issues.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities across issue attention (interaction models). The grey line represents partisans. First differences (∆) with * are significant on the 0.05 level. ∆mm show a change from the minimum issue emphasis to the maximum issue emphasis. ∆sd show a change of two standard deviations.

In a next step we investigate a possible trade-off between the two sources of competence evaluation, i.e. partisanship and issue attention. Regression models are summarized in table 1 (models 1b, 2b, 3b). Let us first address the regression with the full sample. The interaction term between partisanship and issue attention is negative which indicates that attention is less important for partisans. Figure 2a shows that the effect of issue attention is only slightly more pronounced for non-partisans than for partisans. However if we look at extreme changes of issue emphasis, the effects are substantially larger among non-partisans (∆mm 0.1 vs. ∆mm 0.2). Overall the results indicate slight support for the trade-off thesis. However, the effects are small and, as indicated by the larger AIC and BIC in the interaction model, do not improve the model fit.

Figure 2b underscores the finding that on economic issues, issue attention does not affect
perceived competence. This finding is true for partisans and non-partisans. Finally, we turn to voters who are concerned with social issues. Here, issue attention has a striking effect for non-partisans. If we consider the whole range of issue emphasis, the probability of being the owner of the issue increases by 45 percentage points as we change from low issue attention to high issue attention. For partisans, issue attention does not add to the effect of party identification. We even observe a slight negative effect of issue emphasis. This impressive result is underscored by the improvement of the model fit. The AIC as well as the BIC decreases with the introduction of the interaction term between partisanship and issue attention.

Overall this confirms that issue ownership and partisanship are complementary sources at least for issues where ownership can be gained through issue attention.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we look at sources of individual competence ownership perceptions. Students of issue ownership claim that parties’ emphasis of certain issues conferes them ownership on these issues. Critics argue that voters simply consider the party they identify with to be most competent as well. This critique, of course, is very problematic from an issue ownership perspective, since it minimizes the importance of issues for an individual’s voting decision. Moreover, this perspective fails to explain why voters without any party identification consider a party to be competent. We therefore hypothesize that individual competence perceptions not only derive from party identification, but from parties’ attention to issues as well. Adopting a comparative research design, we test our hypotheses in 20 OECD countries. The empirical tests rely on two distinctive datasets. The CSES data provide information about voters’ competence ownership perception, MIP, party identification, as well as socio-demographic control variables. Parties’ issue emphases are taken from the CMP data. We conduct multilevel analyses based on a stacked data matrix. The models are estimated with random intercept logistic regressions, where the outcome variable measures if an individual finds a party competent to solve her most pressing problem. The first basic model estimates the influence of party identification on individual competence perception. As expected, partisanship influences the attribution of issue ownership significantly. For the full
model, we add a predictor measuring parties’ emphasis of the voter’s MIP. We see that party attention contributes to the explanation of an individual’s competence perceptions. Even though this contribution is rather modest, the full model performs better than the basic one. Thus, competence ownership perception is more than a mere reflection of partisanship. Moreover, we find that the impact of parties’ attention to issues depends on the issue addressed. Looking separately at economic and social issues, we notice considerable differences. For economic issues, parties’ attention has no impact on voters’ competence evaluations, whereas parties might greatly benefit from emphasizing social issues. It must be concluded that competence evaluations are determined in a different way for economic and social issues. Voters’ perceptions of a party’s ability to handle the economy might indeed be based on the economic performance of that party rather than on the party’s attention to this issue. The strength of the impact of party attention is not only moderated by the nature of the issue addressed, but also which category of voter we focus on. Issue attention has a stronger impact on non-partisans than on voters who already identify with the party. Overall, however, we can conclude that issue attention and party identification are complementary source of issue ownership. Parties might influence perceptions by emphasizing certain issues in their communication. They do not solely have to rely on voters’ long-term attachments. This conclusion should be reassuring for scholars working on issue ownership voting. Clearly, competence evaluation and party identification are not one and the same predictor of vote choice. While this is an important contribution to the literature on the sources of issue ownership, some questions remain unsolved. The results clearly show differences across issues. While this might be partly due to the data used for measuring parties’ issue emphasis, these differences might be an interesting starting point for future research on the origins of competence ownership perception. Only by assessing the sources of issue ownership can research on its consequences become more relevant.
References


Appendix

Table 2: Main variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey code</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Wording</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSES Q2a</td>
<td>MIP</td>
<td>What do you think is the most important political problem facing [COUNTRY] today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSES Q3a</td>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Thinking of the most important political problem facing [COUNTRY]: which [party/presidential do you think is best in dealing with it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSES Q20</td>
<td>Party identification (PI)</td>
<td>Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?</td>
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Table 3: Countries and elections included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Country Year</th>
<th>N_{total}</th>
<th>N_{comp.}</th>
<th>N_{big}</th>
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<td>1,663</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria (2008)</td>
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<td>691</td>
<td>603</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada (2008)</td>
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<td>1,768</td>
<td>1,486</td>
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<td>Czech Republic (2010)</td>
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<td>790</td>
<td>486</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark (2007)</td>
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<td>1,007</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia (2011)</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland (2011)</td>
<td>1,298</td>
<td>993</td>
<td>680</td>
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<tr>
<td>France (2007)</td>
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<td>1,312</td>
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<td>Germany (2009)</td>
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<td>851</td>
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<td>Switzerland (2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States (2008)</td>
<td>2,102</td>
<td>1,685</td>
<td>1,631</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>36,257</strong></td>
<td><strong>22,613</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,695</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(N_{total}\) = total N
\(N_{comp.}\) = N with competence preference
\(N_{big}\) = N with comp. preference for big party