



How Stable Is Political Parties' Issue Ownership? A Cross-Time, Cross-National Analysis

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psx**Henrik Bech Seeberg****Abstract**

Research on issue ownership is accelerating and so is its use in studies of voting and party behaviour. Yet we do not know how stable issue ownership is. Does it describe a solid, persistent association between a party and an issue in the eyes of the electorate, or does it describe a more fluid and fragile issue reputation of a party among the electorate? Theoretical and empirical work suggests both stability and variability in issue ownership. To get closer to an answer, this article presents and analyses unprecedented comprehensive data on issue ownership. The analysis identifies stability rather than change in issue ownership over time and similarity more than difference across countries, and therefore suggests that issue ownership is a general and long-term rather than a local and short-term phenomenon. The implications for how voters perceive parties are important.

Keywords

issue ownership, parties, voters, comparative analysis

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Research on issue ownership is a growth industry (Lefevere et al., 2015). Yet advancement in the understanding and use of issue ownership is impeded by a lack of systematic knowledge on its stability and variability. Is it a general and long-term phenomenon describing a solid and persistent association between a party and an issue in the eyes of the electorate ensured by a party's long-held link to a certain position and constituency on an issue? Or is it a context-dependent, short-term phenomenon describing a fluctuating and hard-to-uphold reputation of a party on an issue decided by the current performance on the issue?

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Knowledge on the stability over time of issue ownership and its similarity across countries is important because it has major implications for our understanding of parties and voters. If issue ownership is a product of day-to-day politics, it may just be another word for framing effects or political communication – issue ownership is something amenable in the minds of voters that is constantly formed and reformed by current messages from the parties. Issue ownership becomes something that can explain single events but does not travel beyond its immediate context. For instance, accounts of recent elections in Britain have centred closely on the party best able to portray itself as currently most competent in managing the economy (Clarke et al., 2009; Whiteley et al., 2013).

If issue ownership instead appears as a permanent factor from election to election, it expresses something more fundamental about how voters perceive parties equivalent to the role of ideology. Issue ownership means something: even if a voter identifies with a party and agrees with its opinions, she may still prefer another party to take care of a certain issue. She may even vote for this party if this issue becomes important to her. Obama's mobilisation on the traditional democratic issues of health and unemployment thus features as a key ingredient in his 2008 victory (Wright, 2012). In this scenario, parties can take advantage of issue ownership to connect to voters, but will also be constrained by issue ownership in the sense that strategies have to be put together around issue ownership. It is a basic structure for party competition which reflects historical political conflicts, although cleavages and class politics may be long gone.

Existing work suggests both stability and change in issue ownership. The seminal work by John Petrocik (1996) introduces issue ownership in a short-term and a long-term version, and subsequent work has only shown modest interest in clarifying the uncertain degree of stability and change in issue ownership that stems from his work despite its enthusiastic use of issue ownership to understand parties and voters (Walgrave et al., 2012, 2015). By either using issue ownership as a constant to understand voting and party behaviour (e.g. Dolezal et al., 2013; Meguid and Belanger, 2008) or investigating how issue ownership erodes or is overtaken (e.g. Belanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Holian, 2004; Tresch et al., 2013), empirical work emphasises stability as much as instability in issue ownership. So the puzzle remains: Is issue ownership a stable, long-term phenomenon?

In a mediated world concentrated on politicians' competences and performance and their short-term strategies to undercut each other, day-to-day news coverage easily gives the impression that issue reputations are highly conditional. However, this may not be the case if we take one step back and examine the broader patterns. Yet existing work does not provide such a systematic overview. So far, most studies have looked at only a few issues and typically only in one country (e.g. Brasher, 2009; Egan, 2013; Pope and Woon, 2009). As a consequence, systematic knowledge is yet to be seen on how stable voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownerships are, and this hampers progress in the understanding of stability and change in issue ownership.

In this article, a novel database is presented that allows a systematic and comprehensive test of the stability of issue ownership. The database covers issue ownership from 136 national election surveys in 17 countries across three decades. The analysis shows that stability over time and similarity across countries in issue ownership is the norm rather than the exception. On about two out of three issues, issue ownership overall belongs to a party from the same side of the ideological divide over time and across countries. This evidence suggests that issue ownership is a long-term and distinct phenomenon.

The Disagreement on the Stability of Issue Ownership

As a macro-phenomenon, the interest in parties' issue connections has a long history. It emanates from the pioneering work of Schattschneider (1960), Robertson (1976), Budge and Farlie (1983), Carmines (1991) and Riker (1996) to understand party behaviour. At the heart of this classic strand of research is the idea that parties not only compete by taking diverging positions on a pre-given issue, as spatial modelling in the tradition of Downs (1957) would suggest. Parties compete in a multi-dimensional space on multiple issues to decide which issue will dominate political conflict. This issue selection will be subject to party competition because no issue is advantageous to all parties at the same time. Position-taking for a party is not equally beneficial across issues. Without unveiling exactly how issues matter, this idea about the importance of issues for party competition is at the core of this approach.

The idea that parties have diverging connections to issues and that this is central to party competition for votes therefore has deep roots, but it was not explicitly conceptualised until Petrocik (1996) introduced and popularised the concept of issue ownership. In his words (Petrocik, 1996: 826), issue ownership is '[a] reputation for policy and program interest, produced by a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties is more sincere and committed to do something'. Hence, the connection between parties and issues involves far more than the mere position a party takes on an issue. It is also about a party's reputation for showing concern to the issue and being able to solve problems on the issue. This raises the question: Can a party easily change a rival's connection to an issue and can a party count on its connection to an issue in its competition for votes?

Theoretical work on issue ownership does not provide a clear answer. The lack of an answer goes back to Petrocik's (1996) seminal work on issue ownership where a party's connection to an issue comes in two versions, one of them suggesting change and the other suggesting stability. Petrocik talks about 'a performance-based issue ownership', which suggests change in issue ownership. Here, the issue-handling record of the incumbent can 'provide one party with a "lease" – a short-term ownership – of a performance issue' (Petrocik, 1996: 827). He mentions wars, unemployment and inflation as examples of this variable type of issue ownership. He also introduces a

party constituency issue ownership, [which is] much more long-term and stable because its foundation is (1) the relatively stable, but different social bases, that distinguish party constituencies in modern party systems and (2) the link between political conflict and social structure (Petrocik, 1996: 827).

Petrocik does not provide many examples of this latter more stable kind of issue ownership, but social democratic parties' reputation on welfare and their efforts to promote the interest of the low-skilled and low-paid, namely, to foster redistribution through welfare programmes and provide safety from the market comes to mind (Hibbs, 1977). In Petrocik's optic, some issues belong to the short-term category and others belong to the long-term category. Such distinction inevitably raises the questions: Can all issues be categorised as either stable or unstable, or do some fall in between? Do some issues change category over time? Are there some issues in different categories across countries? These are key questions for the understanding of the general stability of issue ownership. It is the aim of this article to seek some answers.

Over the last two decades, the interest in Petrocik's two versions of issue ownership and the questions his distinction raises has been modest. Lately, the lack of clarity on the stability of issue ownership has become a question of definition (Camp et al., 2015; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013; Therriault, 2015; Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave, 2012, 2015). Survey experiments stemming from this exercise come close to reproducing Petrocik's two versions of issue ownership by identifying a handling issue ownership as opposed to an associative issue ownership for each issue. The experiments indicate that the latter features much more stability than the former. However, carried out at the individual level, these experiments do not tell whether issue ownership as a macro-phenomenon that decides winners and losers at elections is stable or not, and even the stability of the handling part of issue ownership may be underestimated (see also Kleinnijenhuis and Walter, 2014). The degree of stability remains an empirical rather than a definitional question.

Although empirical research on issue ownership is currently a growth industry (Lefevere et al., 2015), an answer to the degree of stability and change in issue ownership is yet not provided. Most analysis of issue ownership at the macro-level focuses on fluctuations over time in issue ownership (Belanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Damore, 2004; Green and Jennings, 2012; Pope and Woon, 2009) or identifies instances in which issue ownership has been temporarily undermined or hijacked (Arndt, 2014; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004; Davidsson and Marx, 2013; Holian, 2004). At the same time, stability in issue ownership is also emphasised (e.g. Egan, 2013; Wright, 2012). Alongside this, issue ownership is widely used in studies of voting behaviour (Green and Hobolt, 2007; Meguid and Belanger, 2008; Van der Brug, 2004) and party behaviour (Dolezal et al., 2013; Meguid, 2008; Spoon et al., 2013) as the predictor which is constant across time and identical across countries.

This leaves the impression that issue ownership is stable and unstable at the same time. Moreover, the evidence remains provisional because it covers only a limited number of issues, countries or years. Conclusions from existing research may be an artefact of a particular point in time or may only apply to a particular set of issues or group of countries. Only comprehensive empirical evidence allows for more general conclusions on the stability of issue ownership. In such investigation, a cross-country analysis is just as important as a cross-time analysis because issue ownership may be stable over time in two countries, but associated with the left in one country and the right in another country. In this case, it is as context-dependent as if issue ownership in a country belonged to the left in the 1990s, but the right in the 2000s. In both situations, issue ownership is not a unique marker of what a left party generally is in the eyes of the electorate. Moreover, if issue ownership is unstable over time in a country, this will probably also show up in the analysis as an increasing departure from other countries in the issue-party link. With the massive interest in and use of issue ownership in voting and party studies, it is somewhat surprising that such comprehensive analysis remains to be seen.

A thorough examination of the stability of issue ownership is important because its result has major implications for how voters perceive parties. If issue ownership is stable, then issue ownership describes something fundamental about parties in the eyes of the voters. Issue ownership is something that voters use to navigate the political landscape and distinguish parties from each other. Issue ownership is distinctive. In this scenario, parties are not only ideological creatures defined by their opinion (Budge, 1994) but also entities defined by the issues they are associated with (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Klingemann et al., 1994). Issue ownership is hard to change, but at the same time it offers parties an

advantage in the competition for votes. It is a basic structure for party competition which reflects historic political conflicts, although cleavages and class politics may have waned. If issue ownership is unstable in contrast, it resembles little more than the momentary priming or persuasion effects on public opinion that may arise from parties' short-term strategic communication. It is not as distinctive as if it was a long-term phenomenon. It may provide great leverage in explaining a particular election outcome, but the knowledge about issue ownership in this exact setting may not travel far. Here, parties cannot count on issue ownership, but can instead build more transient reputations for issue-handling competence from one election to the next. In this scenario, issue ownership does not provide much general analytical value.

A New Database on Issue Ownership on Multiple Issues across Countries and Time

To study the stability of issue ownership, a comprehensive dataset is required that provides information on many issues across many countries over a long time. To meet these ambitious data demands, a novel database has been compiled from 136 National Election Studies that collects available information on 46 issues across 17 countries over three decades, mostly from elections but when available also from years in between.¹ The 17 countries are Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the United Kingdom,² Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Among the 46 issues, only 12 have sufficient observations for a robust cross-country, cross-time analysis (see below). These issues are: the economy, health, education, environment, law and order, unemployment, tax, asylum/immigration, social security, elderly care, families and the European Union (for EU member states). Table 1 provides an overview.

Although the analysis is primarily concerned with stability in issue ownership across time and countries, it is worthwhile considering what can be expected to be the preferred party on each issue. Existing studies seem to agree that issues related to public finance like public debt, deficit on the public budget and tax, and issues related to the national interest such as law and order, asylum/immigration, defence, international affairs and to some extent also the EU³ (for EU member states) are associated with right-of-centre parties. Issues related to the welfare state, such as health, education, unemployment, jobs, social security, families and elderly care, are related to the Social Democratic Party or the Socialist Party. This is also true for the environment if a Green Party does not own the issue. Several studies report that the economy does not belong consistently to any party (Belanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Petrocik, 1996; Pope and Woon, 2009).

For the analysis of these issues, information on issue ownership is collected at the voter level in each of the national election surveys via a question about the preferred party on an issue (see below). Although issue ownership is a macro-phenomenon reflecting an asset of a party, it is rarely measured through party statements or elite interviews (an exception is Busemeyer et al., 2013), but typically as an aggregate of voters' perceptions of the party (see, for example, Egan, 2013; Petrocik, 1996; Stubager and Slothuus, 2013).

In the survey question, respondents can choose one party on each issue. The party with the strongest reputation is referred to as the issue owner. Adhering to standards in the literature (Brasher, 2009; Egan, 2013: 66; Petrocik, 1996), this is calculated in two steps. First, the proportion of respondents naming each party on an issue is calculated, and respondents who did not name a party are excluded. Second, to identify the party with the

Table 1. Overview of Data on Issue Ownership across Countries Over Time.

| | Economy | Health | Education | Environment | Law and order | Unemployment | Tax | Asylum/ immigration | Social security | Elderly care | Families | EU |
|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|------------|------------------------|-----------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| Sweden | 91-10 (6) | 02-10 (3) | 94-06 (4) | 91-02 (4) | 91-02 (4) | 79-10 (8) | 91-10 (6) | 91-02 (4) | 91-98 (3) | 98-10 (4) | 94-10 (5) | 91-02 (4) |
| Denmark | 90-11 (7) | 98-11 (5) | 01-11 (4) | 94-11 (6) | 94-11 (6) | 90-11 (7) | 94-07 (5) | 98-11 (5) | 90-11 (5) | 98-11 (5) | 98-07 (4) | 94-11 (6) |
| United Kingdom | 95-13 (13) | 90-12 (12) | 90-12 (12) | 95-98 (3) | 92-12 (11) | 78-12 (15) | 92-12 (11) | 04-13 (5) | | | 95-08 (7) | 95-07 (7) |
| United States | 90-12 (10) | 92-12 (4) | 96-12 (4) | 90-98 (5) | 90-12 (6) | 76-12 (7) | 94-12 (3) | 12 (1) | 92-12 (5) | | | |
| Australia | 93-13 (3) | 90-13 (9) | 90-13 (9) | 90-13 (9) | 93 (1) | 90-10 (8) | 90-13 (9) | 96-13 (7) | 93 (1) | | | |
| New Zealand | 90-11 (6) | 90-08 (5) | 90-11 (6) | 90-08 (3) | 90-08 (6) | 90-08 (3) | 99-05 (2) | 90-05 (4) | | | | |
| Norway | | 01-05 (2) | 01-09 (3) | 01-09 (3) | | | 01-09 (3) | 01-09 (3) | 01-09 (3) | 01-09 (3) | 01-09 (3) | 01-05 (2) |
| France | | | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | 02-07 (2) | | |
| Italy | 06-08 (2) | 01-06 (2) | 01-06 (2) | | 01-06 (2) | 01-08 (3) | 01-08 (3) | 01-08 (3) | | | | 01 (1) |
| Germany | 90-02 (3) | 02 (1) | | 90 (1) | 90-98 (2) | 76-11 (16) | 98-02 (2) | 90-05 (3) | 05 (1) | | | |
| Switzerland | 11 (1) | 03-11 (3) | 07 (1) | 03-11 (2) | 03-11 (3) | | 11 (1) | 03-11 (3) | | | | 03-11 (3) |
| Canada | 08-11 (2) | 04-08 (3) | | 04-08 (3) | 04-08 (2) | 04-08 (2) | 04-06 (2) | | | | 04 (1) | |
| Belgium | 09 (1) | | | 09 (1) | 09 (1) | 09 (1) | 09 (1) | 09 (1) | | | | |
| Finland | | 07 (1) | | 07 (1) | | 07-11 (2) | | 06-10 (2) | 07-11 (2) | 07 (1) | | |
| The Netherlands | 06-10 (2) | 06 (1) | | | | | | 06-10 (2) | 06 (1) | 06-10 (2) | | |
| Austria | 09 (1) | | | | | 09 (1) | | 09 (1) | | | | |
| Ireland | 09 (1) | 09 (1) | | | 09 (1) | | | | | | | |
| Total | 90-13 (58) | 90-13 (52) | 90-13 (48) | 90-13 (43) | 90-12 (47) | 76-12 (76) | 90-13 (50) | 90-13 (44) | 90-12 (20) | 98-11 (17) | 94-10 (21) | 91-11 (23) |
| Countries (n) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Full model | 14 (58) | 14 (52) | 10 (48) | 13 (43) | 13 (47) | 13 (76) | 13 (50) | 14 (44) | 8 (20) | 6 (17) | 5 (21) | 6 (23) |
| Cross-country | 14 (38) | 14 (36) | 10 (29) | 10 (23) | 11 (26) | 13 (35) | 13 (32) | 14 (33) | 6 (10) | 6 (15) | 5 (14) | 6 (15) |
| Cross-time | 7 (48) | 8 (44) | 7 (42) | 9 (37) | 7 (38) | 8 (67) | 8 (42) | 9 (37) | 3 (13) | 3 (12) | 4 (19) | 4 (20) |

EU: European Union.
Cell entries are the time interval in which data on issue ownership are available for the country on that issue. The parentheses report a count of the time points for analysis.

strongest reputation among these endorsements on each issue, the score for the left-of-centre party (or scores for the group of left-wing parties in multi-party systems) has been subtracted from the score of the right-of-centre party at each point in time (the coding of parties is explained below). The measure of issue ownership thereby ranges from -100 (a left-of-centre party gets all voter endorsements on the issue) to $+100$ (a right-of-centre party gets all voter endorsements on the issue). If, for instance, the left-of-centre party is endorsed by 30% of the voters and the right-of-centre party by 70%, this generates an issue ownership of $+40$ to the right-of-centre party.⁴

This measure is applied in existing studies not only in two-party systems but also in multi-party systems (Stubager and Slothuus, 2013) because also in this context it provides a parsimonious way to decide across a large number of countries and elections which side of the political spectrum has issue ownership. As party competition in multi-party systems is usually organised into two rival blocs on the left–right scale through the formation of a government together with parties that do not seek to replace it against the opposition, it is often more important to know whether the left or right has issue ownership than, for example, the Communist Party or the Socialist Party. Important consequences of a switch in issue ownership like a change of government are more likely in the former case (Andersen, 2003). This focus is also evident in studies of party competition which predominantly look at mainstream parties' efforts to make voters switch side through issue ownership (Arndt, 2014; Bale, 2003; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004; Davidsson and Marx, 2013; Meguid, 2008; one exception is Spoon et al., 2013).⁵

In the analysis, the most popular party (or group of parties in multi-party systems) on an issue across time and countries is estimated in a univariate regression model with fixed effects across the country panels. In this model, which only includes the issue ownership variable, the intercept term estimates a weighted average across all observations taking into account that the number of observations (time points) as well as the variance of these observations vary across countries. The intercept indicates the average issue ownership across countries and over time. If this intercept is statistically significant, the issue ownership score is systematically different from zero (to the left or the right on the -100 to $+100$ scale) and hence rather similar across countries. If issue ownership changes a lot over time in each of the countries or is very different between countries, the observations in the regression will be positive and negative, and the regression estimate will be close to zero and probably statistically insignificant.

To ensure robust comparison, an observation on an issue for a country in a given year is only included if it contains at least 50 respondents. For the same reasons, the analysis only contains issues where more than five countries are present, among which at least three have more than three time points. This reduces the number of issues from 46 to 12. Generally, information on these 12 issues is available for most countries across the full period, but it does vary (see Table 1). However, in several countries, measures of issue ownership have only been introduced recently. This information is important in order to shed light on the between-country variation in issue ownership, but may mislead the investigation of the temporal variation. If this group of countries is included in a temporal analysis and an issue ownership grows less certain, it may be a true temporal dynamic or a natural consequence of gradually including more countries as data become available. Similarly, countries with long time-series data on an issue and changes in issue ownership over time may wrongly indicate great dissimilarity in a cross-country analysis even if the current issue ownership is similar to other countries. To avoid such uncertainties, the analysis is divided into two parts. The cross-time analysis includes only countries that

have at least three observations on the issue. The cross-country analysis looks at information only after 2000 for each country. A cross-country analysis before 2000 is not possible due to the smaller number of countries in this time period.

To allow comparison, parties have been coded into party families using the approach of the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2014),⁶ where liberal parties⁷ have a code just like conservative, Christian democratic, agrarian and extreme right parties (the right-of-centre parties in the analysis),⁸ as well as social democratic, green and socialist/communist parties (the left-of-centre parties).⁹ Parties not in parliament are left out. This classification does not affect the calculation of the overall left–right issue ownership which is still based on information at the party level. The classification only ensures that parties are rightly assigned to either the left or the right across countries.

Similarly, question items have been content-coded into issue categories,¹⁰ that is, questions on health into one category and so on.¹¹ Questions about multiple issues are excluded. This issue coding was rather straightforward, but coding questions from different election studies is not necessarily unproblematic. First, question wording varies across countries, that is, the voter is asked to pick which party ‘is best at solving (or dealing with) an issue’ or ‘will do a better job at solving an issue’, which is the standard in most countries, or to choose the party with ‘a good policy’ in Sweden and ‘the party closest to own view’ in Australia. These are not trivial variations and have been shown to affect which predispositions voters use to choose a party (Camp et al., 2015). However, it is also shown that the choice of the preferred party in the aggregate is much less affected (Camp et al., 2015), and this is the information of interest in the current analysis.¹²

Second, the phrasing of the issue on which to evaluate the parties differs in a few examples like unemployment where voters are asked to evaluate parties with regard to ‘fighting unemployment’ in Germany and Denmark, ‘creating jobs’ in Canada and ‘their policy on employment’ in Sweden. This may become a problem for temporal and spatial comparison insofar as the aggregate choice of party differs across these options. In most cases, though, the same presentation is used across countries. Instead of asking about an issue just by its name, voters are asked which party is best able to, for example, ‘lower the tax burden’, ‘fight crime’ or ‘protect the environment’ (e.g. in Germany, Canada and Denmark). In these instances, voters may be sent in a certain direction in terms of choosing a party. But since they are usually sent in the same direction across time and countries, this makes relative comparisons less of a concern and probably genuinely reflects how voters think about an issue and therefore also the preferred party – in many cases, the content reflects a widely shared goal.

Issue Ownership Stability and Change: Empirical Evidence

An issue is unequivocally associated with a certain type of party if a systematic and consistent pattern in the preferred party on an issue emerges across time and space. This is tested in Figure 1, which reports the overall left–right endorsement across issues (the left-of-centre party score subtracted from the right-of-centre party score) for all countries in the entire period. The dots in Figure 1 display the intercept term from the univariate fixed effect regression for each issue with countries as panels (reported in Table A3 in the online Appendix). The short horizontal lines indicate its confidence interval. If the line is to the right (left) of and does not touch the vertical line, a right (left) party generally has the issue ownership.

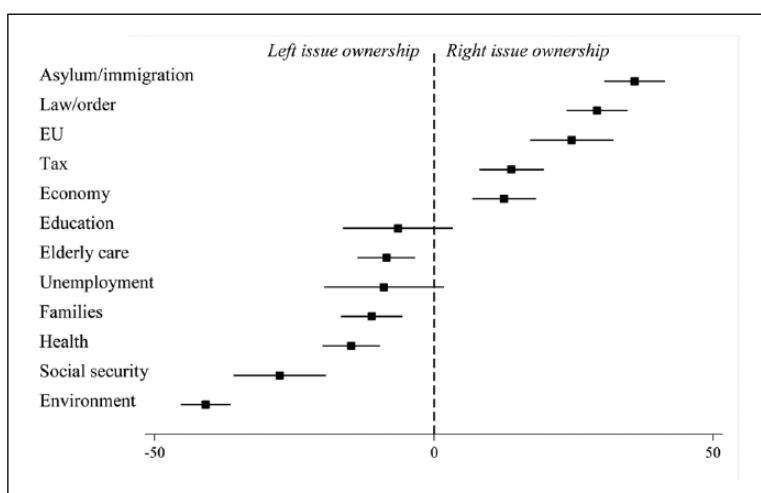


Figure 1. Issue Ownership (%) across Countries and Over Time.

Estimates are reported in Table A3 in the online Appendix. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of observations included.

The issue ownership estimates fall on a diagonal line. At both ends of the line, some issues are strongly affiliated with one type of party. Several issues are close to a score of 40, which means that one party is endorsed by maybe 70% and the other only by 30%. The advantage is in most parts considerable, and although the highest scores do not exceed 50, they typically mean that one party is endorsed by a majority of voters – even the party with the weakest score will get some endorsement, pushing the relative advantage score below 50. To the left of the vertical line, the environment, social security, health, families and elderly care are firmly associated with left parties. To the right of the vertical line, law and order, asylum/immigration, the EU, tax and the economy are solidly associated with right parties. This is much in agreement with previous findings, apart from the economy which is often found not to belong to any party. In the middle of the diagonal line, two issues do not escape the vertical line. The negative coefficients for education and unemployment indicate that left parties have issue ownership, but the intersection of the confidence intervals with the vertical line reveals that this is not systematic. The direction of issue ownership corresponds to previous studies that also attach these issues to left-of-centre parties. These latter issue ownerships may be truly unsettled, but the finding may also be driven either by certain countries or by a certain period (see the discussion of the data). The same could apply for the larger group of more settled issue ownerships. To find out, the analysis proceeds in two directions: cross-country variation in associations between parties and issues and cross-time variation.

Cross-Country Pattern

The cross-country pattern is displayed in Figures 2 and 3, where the former gives the overview and the latter comes with more detail. The estimates in Figure 2 are calculated like those in Figure 1, except now based on observations after 2000 (reported in Table A4 in the online Appendix). Hence, the black markers give the average issue ownership across the countries, and the confidence intervals indicated by the horizontal lines

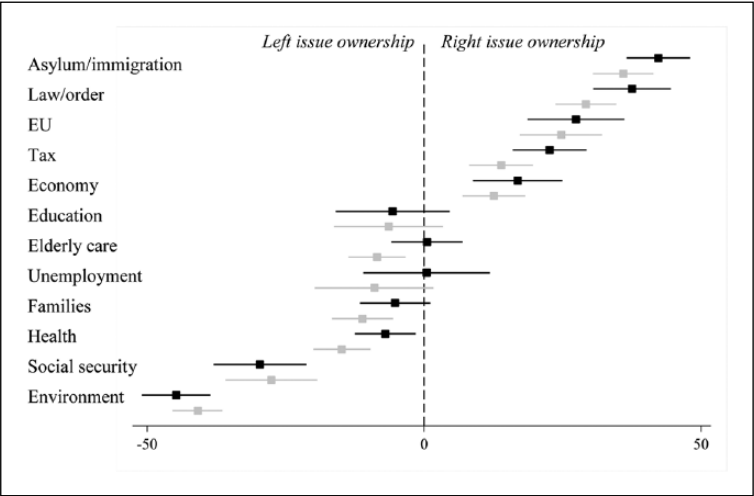


Figure 2. Issue Ownership (%) across Countries in the 2000s. Estimates are reported in Tables A3 and A4 in the online Appendix. Estimates based on >2000 marked by black; estimates for entire period marked by grey. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of observations included.

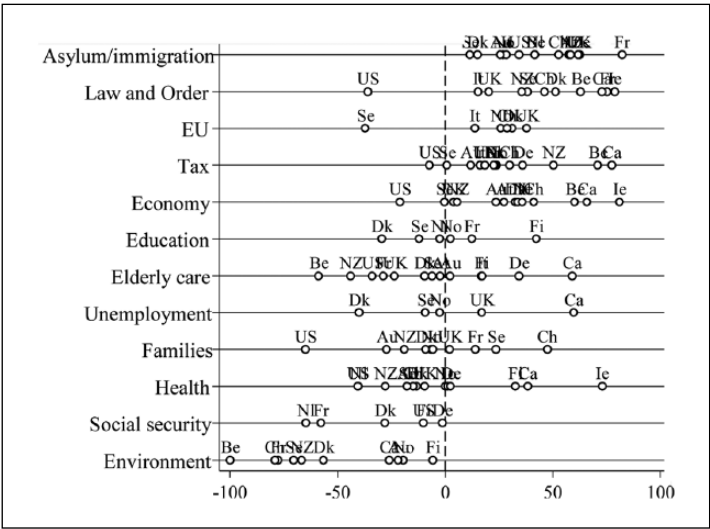


Figure 3. Issue Ownership (%) for Each Country in the 2000s. The figure reports the average left–right issue ownership score for each country on each issue from 2000 onwards. The countries can be identified by their abbreviations.

indicate the variation in issue ownership across the countries. Estimates from Figure 1 on the entire dataset are included as grey markers to accentuate changes. Figure 3 provides with the many circles on the horizontal lines the average left–right issue ownership in the 2000s for each country across the issues (observations reported in Table A5 in the online Appendix).

The comparison in Figure 2 reveals that the estimates for the issues at the ends of the diagonal line – the environment, social security, economy, tax, the EU, law/order and asylum/immigration – move even further away from the vertical line, and the confidence intervals shorten in several instances. Narrowing the timeline to only the 2000s and concentrating on the cross-country variation suggests similar issue ownership across countries for this cluster of issues. This similarity is also evident in Figure 3, where the country-estimates except for a very few exceptions fall consistently on the same side of the vertical zero-line.

In contrast, the estimates for the remaining group of issues in the middle of the diagonal line in Figure 2 move closer to the vertical line, indicating less similar issue ownership across countries. This is certainly true for unemployment, elderly care and education, but less so for health and families, which maintain some distance from the vertical line (for families at the 0.10 level of significance). Compared to previous findings, this less clear issue ownership to left-of-centre parties on the three issues in the middle is surprising. Figure 3 also documents this less uniform pattern with country-estimates more spread out and on both sides of the vertical zero-line, especially for unemployment, elderly care and education.

Overall, 9 out of 12 issues display quite similar issue ownership across countries in the 2000s. Most notable among the three issues diverging from this pattern, the issue ownership of unemployment is highly unclear in the cross-country analysis.

Cross-Time Pattern

The cross-time pattern is visible in Figure 4, which draws the marginal plots for each issue of a fixed effect regression with countries as panels (reported in Table A6 in the online Appendix). In the regression, the issue ownership is predicted by a simple linear count variable. If the count variable has a statistically significant effect on issue ownership, then issue ownership changes systematically over time across all countries. If a squared count variable indicated the best fit, this is reported. In Figure 4, the issue ownership is indicated on the x-axis, and the further the line is towards -100 ($+100$) on the left (right) of the figure, the more the issue is associated with a left-of-centre (right-of-centre) party.

Large parts of the pattern from the cross-country analysis can be reproduced in the cross-time display in Figure 4. The issue ownerships most discernible across countries are also the most discernible across time. As should be expected from previous examination of issue ownership patterns, the marginal effect line is persistently to the right of the vertical zero-line for law and order, asylum/immigration and the EU. Similarly, the environment is persistently to the left of the zero-line. Neither line is completely vertical, so the issue ownerships do move over time in most instances. The issue ownerships of the environment, the EU and asylum/immigration have moved further away from the vertical line and hence grown stronger. The issue ownership of law and order first weakened during the 1990s hitting a low around 2001, but then became more solid again in the 2000s. However, the key point is that each line stays on one side of the zero-line, indicating overall stability across time.

Education and especially health appeared in Figures 1 and 2 to be generally associated with the left parties across countries, and this also seems to be the case across time in Figure 4. Both marginal plots stay to the left of the zero-line, but both also remain in the vicinity of this zero-line with confidence intervals in parts of the interval only barely escaping the zero-line. This applies especially to education and could explain why its

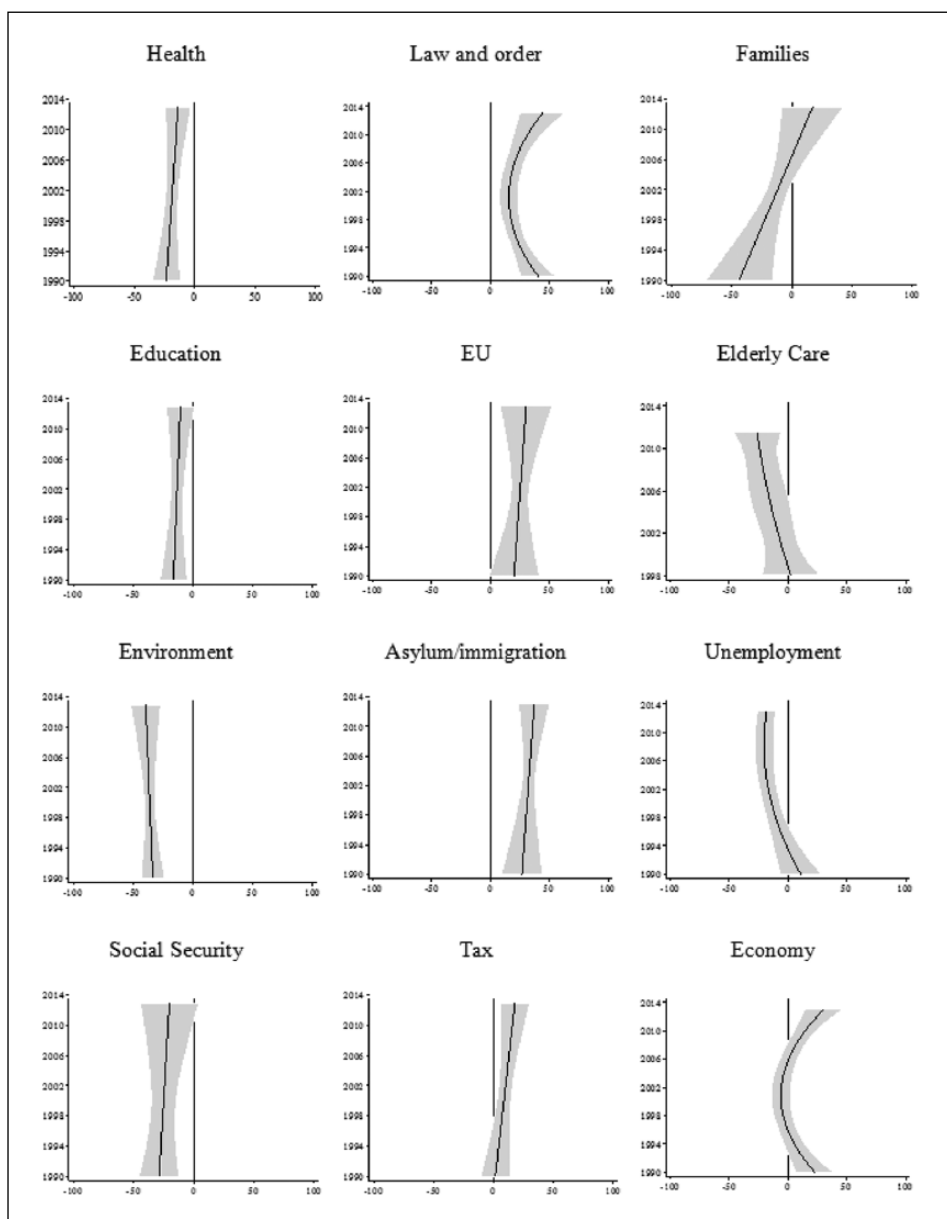


Figure 4. Marginal Plots of Issue Ownership (%) across Countries Over Time.

Note: Marginal plots with 95% confidence intervals are based on the estimates reported in Table A6 in the online Appendix. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of observations included.

confidence interval in Figure 1 crosses the zero-line. This pattern also applies to social security, although a stronger issue ownership was indicated in Figures 1 and 2. With a marginal effect line becoming less discernible from the zero-line and a confidence interval enclosing the zero-line towards the end of the interval, the somewhat uncertain issue ownerships on social security and education appear to be a more recent phenomenon.

Historically, it looks to be associated with the left. Hence, for this largest part of the issues, the issue ownership pattern corresponds to the results of previous studies.

While tax and the economy were found to belong to right parties in the cross-country analysis, this is less clear across time. The tax issue is just to the right of the zero-line and its confidence intervals do not escape it for the first part of the period, which indicates a rather unclear issue ownership across time. This is surprising given that existing work firmly associates the issue with right-of-centre parties. Likewise, the economy moves from a rather clear right issue ownership to be almost a left issue ownership at the turn of the millennium and back again. Unlike the tax issue, the instability of the economy is expected from previous studies. In contrast to these issues, the issue ownership of unemployment, which looked ambiguous across countries in Figure 2, appears much clearer across time as should be expected based on previous studies. Early in the period it is more unclear, but then it moves firmly and persistently to the left.

The issue ownerships for elderly care and families become less clear across time compared to the overall view in Figure 1, where these issues were associated with left-of-centre parties. Only for these two issues does the marginal effect line move straight from one side to the other of the zero-line. This indicates a change in issue ownership. Elderly care moves from a very weak right issue ownership to a strong left issue ownership. The issue ownership of families moves in the opposite direction. As with the unclear cross-country pattern for these issues in Figure 2, we should be careful to conclude too much from this. It may reflect genuine changes, but it may also be an artefact of the low number of observations in the sample on these issues.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that issue ownership appears rather stable across time for a large majority of the 12 issues. The issues of law and order, asylum/immigration, the EU and the environment are stable across countries and time. This also counts for health, education, unemployment and social security, although these issues display some less solid issue ownership both across countries and across time. This pattern between issues and parties matches findings in previous work. The issue ownerships of elderly care and families appear rather unsettled across countries and across time. Tax and the economy were found to consistently belong to the right parties across countries in the 2000s, but a cross-time examination reveals less certainty. This matches results of prior studies for the economy, but not for the issues of tax, elderly care and families.

Robustness

To test the robustness of these findings, each estimation reported in Figures 1, 2 and 4 has been replicated with one country excluded at a time (this jackknife analysis is reported in Tables A3, A4 and A6 in the online Appendix). The replications show that the overall findings do not change in any important ways. That is, the timelines or the cross-country lines stay on the identified side of the vertical zero-line in most instances. In some cases, the significance level comes closer to 0.2 than 0.05, like unemployment across time and countries, the EU, social security and education over time, as well as health in the general cross-time cross-country analysis. However, each estimate stays on the identified side of the vertical line, and the inevitable drop in observations in these cases with excluded countries therefore suggests that it probably has to do with the weakened statistical power of the estimation more than a genuinely unclear issue ownership.¹³

The issue ownership of education loses its statistical significance entirely in one instance in the cross-country analysis when Australia is excluded from the cross-country

analysis. Similarly, the weak issue ownership of unemployment in the cross-country analysis is reflected in the robustness check, where elimination of countries sends the estimate in both a positive and a negative direction. Finally, the robustness check confirms the lack of clarity especially across countries on the issues of families and elderly care where estimates especially for elderly care switch from negative to positive. These are among the issues with the smallest number of countries for analysis, which may explain a large part of this lack of clarity across time and countries.

Summing up, the robustness check to a large degree re-affirms the information from the main analysis that a majority of issues display clear issue ownership across countries and time, and a minority of issues, especially elderly care and families, appear to have unclear issue ownership.

Implications

Based on an unprecedented, comprehensive dataset from 136 national election studies collecting available information on issue ownership for 12 issues across 17 countries over three decades, this study attempts to address a major unresolved aspect of issue ownership, namely, its stability across time and similarity across countries. A previous lack of such evidence has caused an inconvenient confusion in the use of this central concept connecting voters and parties at the issue level: Issue ownership is applied as the 'critical constant' in voting and party behaviour, but research on issue ownership meanwhile centres on its instability. This ambiguity can be traced back to the seminal work of Petrocik (1996), who introduced a short-term and a long-term version of issue ownership stressing both stability and change.

Judging from a large majority of the 12 issues in the analysis, issue ownership appears quite stable across time and quite similar across countries when comparing the links between issues and parties to the left and right of the political spectrum. It is fairly accurate to talk about an association between left parties and issues related to the welfare state such as health, education, social security, unemployment and the environment. Right parties are associated with issues related to national interests such as law and order, asylum/immigration, the EU and to some extent also the size of the state, such as taxes. This pattern of issue-party connections matches previous findings. While elderly care and families today appear to belong to the left across countries and tax and the economy to the right, this residual group of issues appears to be unconnected to a particular party over time. Existing studies also report such instability over time on the economy, but not on the three other issues. The level of stability is probably lower at the level of individual parties, where issue ownership may be switching back and forth between a Conservative and a Liberal Party or a Socialist and a Communist Party, but the important point from this analysis is that issue ownership does not tend to cross over from left to right.

The most important message of this study is that connections between parties and issues in the eyes of voters are generally persistent despite changes in the political landscape where it is evident that cleavages and alignments between parties and voters as a structure for political conflict are being eroded (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Green-Pedersen, 2007). According to the analysis, a party's historical affiliation with an issue seems in the long run to make its issue association robust to short-term fluctuations in parties' performance on issues and the specific context. In this sense, the study takes a

step towards clarifying the ambiguity from Petrocik's (1996: 826–828) conceptualisation of issue ownership by highlighting long-term stability vis-à-vis short-term instability.

The implications for our conception of the relationship between parties and voters are important. This study indicates that issue ownership is a key source of information on how voters generally perceive parties – issue associations are an integral part of what parties are. Parties are not only ideological creatures defending a particular standpoint (Budge, 1994) but also entities defined by the issues they are associated with (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Klingemann, 1994). Issue ownership is distinctive and can be used to mobilise voters. Hence, parties can take advantage of issue ownership in their competition for voters, but will also be constrained by issue ownership in the sense that strategies have to be put together around issue ownership.

The data in this article not only allow a more accurate use of issue ownership to study party and voting behaviour across countries and time, but also their general scope opens up opportunities to advance insights on issue ownership. An important challenge is to gain a stronger account of the forces upholding the general pattern of issue ownership across time and across countries. One way forward is to investigate comparatively variation in stability underlying the general findings presented in this article: Why is issue ownership of some issues easier to uphold? Why are some issue ownerships particularly similar across countries? Although research on issue ownership has been conducted for decades and has flourished recently, this article shows that there is still a lot to be learned.

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Notes

- 1 To avoid influential observations, the part of a time series that extends back in time for only one country or a few has been eliminated.
- 2 Since time-series data on the United Kingdom are not available from the British Election Study, data that in content are equivalent to those provided by National Election Studies have been collected from Ipsos Mori.
- 3 The issue ownership of the European Union is more unclear, though, since the rivals tend to be the mainstream parties on both sides of the centre against parties at each end of the political spectrum (Taggart, 1998).
- 4 A weakness of this measure is that the right-of-centre parties together may have issue ownership, but the Social Democrats may have the clearly largest issue ownership score. However, as reported in Figure A1 in the online Appendix, such a situation very rarely occurs.
- 5 Figure A1 in the online Appendix reports the information on issue ownership scores for each party in each country that is used to calculate the overall left–right issue ownership across countries.
- 6 In Denmark, voters are asked to choose the left or the right bloc. With multiple parties in parliament, the Danish measurement deviates from the typical measurement at the party level. Since party competition in Denmark centres around the two main parties of the left and the right, the Social Democrats and the Liberals (at least from the mid-1990s), these parties were used to code the party family according to the CMP coding of the issue ownership question in Denmark.
- 7 The Liberal Democrats in Britain before the 2010 coalition should probably be classified as a centrist if not a left-of-centre more than a right-of-centre party. However, this does not affect the results since issue ownership in Britain for this analysis is only measured for Labour and Conservatives.

- 8 Christian democratic parties are coded as part of the right-of-centre parties, which are not expected to have issue ownership of welfare issues (as discussed above). However, in countries historically dominated by a Christian Democratic Party such as The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Austria, welfare issues connected to the family may belong to this party (Van Kersbergen, 1995). Since data are not available for these countries on these issues (see Table 1), this cannot be further investigated in the analysis, and it cannot cause cross-country divergences on these issues in the analysis.
- 9 This is a standard classification in research on parties and voters (Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). In the CMP codebook, the US Democrats and the British Labour Party are coded as belonging to the Social Democratic Party family. More centrist parties such as the Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom or the Social Liberals in Denmark are also coded according to the CMP codebook and therefore as part of the right parties. Ideally, each of these centrist parties would be coded in detail over time according to which government they would join or support. However, with the number of elections to cover, this would be an overwhelming task, and it would probably not change the results substantively based on the current analysis where the large number of elections in multiple countries helps cancel out such measurement error.
- 10 I used the issue content codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al., 2011).
- 11 To reflect the perception of welfare in the United States, this was coded as social security.
- 12 See Tables A1 and A2 in the online Appendix for a list of questions.
- 13 In the cross-time analysis, the intercept for tax and the coefficient for the time effect for health change their sign. However, this does not change the overall conclusions with an issue ownership of tax generally to the right and an issue ownership of health generally to the left. It only suggests more movement over time when specific countries are left out of the estimation.

Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Table A1. Questions from the national election studies.

Table A2. The issue content of the question. Phrases deviating from the standard question.

Table A3. Estimates of issue ownership across countries and the entire period.

Table A4. Estimates of issue ownership across countries in the 2000s.

Table A5. Average issue ownership in the 2000s across countries and issues.

Table A6. Estimates of issue ownership across countries over time.

Figure A1. Average issue ownership scores in the 2000s for each party across countries and issues.

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