

What Are the Sources of Political Parties' Issue Ownership? Testing Four Explanations at the Individual Level

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Abstract Political parties' issue ownership—their perceived competence in handling issues and problems—is a major ingredient explaining voting behavior. Yet, our understanding of the sources of issue ownership is limited. This study is the first to bring together and evaluate four different explanations of voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership: partisanship, attitudes, perceived real-world developments, and constituency-based ownership. Using novel measures implemented in a national survey, we show that all four sources exert independent, if varying, influences on voters' issue ownership perceptions. Even though voters' partisanship tends to dominate issue ownership perceptions, attitudes and performance evaluations also matter. Moreover, the hitherto mostly neglected constituency based component of ownership has a substantial, independent influence on ownership perceptions. These findings indicate that issue ownership is more than merely an expression of partisanship and attitudes.

Keywords Issue ownership · Partisanship · Attitudes · Performance evaluations · Party constituencies

The concept of “issue ownership” has gained prominence in explanations of both electoral behavior (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004; Green and Hobolt 2008; Sanders et al. 2011) and party competition and agenda setting processes (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2007; Walgrave and de Swert 2007; Walgrave et al. 2009). The theory of issue ownership (Petrocik

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1996) posits that if a political party “owns” an issue, it has an electoral advantage on the issue and hence will benefit from emphasizing that issue in an election. An important part of electoral competition among political parties is, therefore, competition around “selective emphasis” on issues that benefit particular parties (Budge and Farlie 1983; Carmines 1991). According to Petrocik (1996, p. 826), issue ownership is the perception among voters that a given party or candidate “is better able to ‘handle’” certain “problems facing the country” than the opponent party (parties) or candidate(s), where

‘[h]andling’ is the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a reputation for policy and program interest, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties ... is more sincere and committed to doing something about them. (p. 826)

Thus, issue ownership implies that voters at large perceive one party to be particularly competent and dedicated to take care of an issue or concern—this party “owns” the issue.

So far, research has mostly focused on the effects and sources of issue ownership at the party level (cf. Bélanger and Meguid 2008). For example, studies have uncovered a higher than expected degree of volatility in parties’ issue ownerships and documented the strong influence of the media in addition to parties themselves in shaping parties’ issue ownership profiles (Walgrave and de Swert 2007; Brasher 2009; Walgrave et al. 2009).

Less systematic knowledge exists about the sources of issue ownership at the level of the individual voter, however. Thus, even though various studies (not least Petrocik 1996, cf. below) delineate different individual level sources of issue ownership perceptions, we know of no study that examines these sources together. Consequently, little is known about which sources actually affect ownership perceptions and their relative strength. This paper seeks to fill this void by focusing on four specific sources of ownership perceptions that previous research, explicitly or implicitly, has pointed out as important.

Party identification is an obvious source of issue ownership perceptions because party identification can work as a “perceptual screen” through which voters see the political world (Bartels 2002; Campbell et al. 1960). Likewise, a voter’s attitude to a given issue may also play a role (Sanders et al. 2011). However, the potential of the concept of issue ownership in explaining voting behavior hinges upon the establishment that it is more than mere rationalization from partisanship and attitudes. So far, most attention to factors beyond partisanship and attitudes has been directed towards voters’ evaluations of parties’ performance with respect to a given issue, but Petrocik (1996) also emphasizes the importance of, what he terms, “constituency based” ownership deriving from the association between specific parties and specific social groups. Particularly this last source has been neglected in the literature, but, in addition, it remains an open question whether the four sources actually influence ownership perceptions and what their relative strength might be. Hence, it is unclear whether parties can actually achieve ownership of issues by establishing long-term relationships with societal groups. Likewise, do performance evaluations influence voters’

issue ownership perceptions above and beyond partisanship and attitudes? These questions are crucial to address in order to clarify whether issue ownership is more than merely an expression of partisanship and attitudes.

Next, we discuss the four sources of issue ownership in more detail before testing their effect on voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership across a range of issues. In the analyses, we rely on a set of indicators—including novel measures of “constituency based” issue ownership—administered in a survey of Danish voters carried out in 2007/2008. The results show that all four sources of issue ownership play independent roles, even if partisanship appears as the most important source on most issues. However, the analyses indicate that the hitherto mostly neglected constituency based component of issue ownership has a substantial, independent influence on ownership perceptions. In the conclusion, we discuss theoretical and empirical implications as well as the generalizability of the results outside the Danish context.

The Sources of Issue Ownership

The four sources of issue ownership in focus here are dealt with in different parts of the scholarly literature. In the original *American Voter* formulation, *party identification* constitutes “the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment,” a party, that is (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 121; cf. also Bartels 2002); and it is seen as developing out of individuals’ social positions as well as childhood socialization. According to partisanship theory, it therefore arises prior to any evaluation of parties’ competences on specific issues. Consequently, such evaluations—issue ownership perceptions—may be influenced by individuals’ party identification in the way that identified voters accord “their” party ownership over issues (in some instances, at least) merely because it is “their” preferred party. Partisanship, therefore, should be a strong source of voters’ issue ownership evaluations (cf. Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Kuechler 1991; Narud and Valen 2001).

Apart from their overall partisanship, voters may also be influenced by their ideological or attitudinal positions when forming issue ownership perceptions (cf. Bellucci 2006; Sanders et al. 2011; van der Brug 2004). On most issues of relevance to political competition, parties’ positions will be well known to most voters (Petersen et al. 2010; Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012; Snyder and Ting 2002). It is therefore a small step for them to accord ownership to a party with a position that matches their own.

Thus, partisanship and attitudes are seen as influencing issue ownership perceptions through the same mechanism in which “[e]motional attachments [function] as a filter in cognitive information processing” (Kuechler 1991, p. 82). In other words, voters’ “pre-existing affective bonds” and “ideological beliefs” cause them to rationalize their vote choices by pointing to their (for other reasons) preferred party as best to handle a given issue (ibid.; Borre and Goul Andersen 1997). This, quite possibly unconscious process of rationalization, derives its

¹ On this background, Kuechler (1991) and Bellucci (2006) refer to partisanship and attitudes as “affective” sources of issue ownership. To the extent that partisanship is better conceived of as “a

potency from voters' capacity for "motivated reasoning" (cf. Taber and Lodge 2006) rather than synoptic rational deliberations.¹

However, in his seminal work on issue ownership, Petrocik (1996) refers to two other sources. The first is the competence component reflected in the parties' abilities to deal with policy problems, that is, providing the most competent solutions to political problems such as crime.² This component of issue ownership is linked to the performance of parties in their handling of the specific problems; it is therefore somewhat volatile and might shift between parties in the short run (cf. Bellucci 2006; Martinsson 2009). As Petrocik (1996) explains,

[t]he record of the incumbent creates a handling advantage when one party can be blamed for current difficulties....wars, failed international or domestic policies, unemployment and inflation, or official corruption can happen at any time and provide one party with a "lease"—short-term ownership—of a performance issue. (p. 827)

Thus, a party's perceived competence in handling specific problems will be sensitive to actual developments in the economy, national security, and other issues. Consequently, voters' perceptions of such developments should have an important influence on their issue ownership perceptions.

This performance source has been the major focus of the research that followed Petrocik's (1996) article, but he also suggests a deeper, more stable source which he accords strong, fundamental influence on ownership perceptions (cf. Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; see, however, Brasher 2009, p. 71). This source, that has so far mostly escaped the scholarly searchlight, relates to the linkages between political parties and social groups and refers to which political party is associated with which specific group in society such as the poor or the well-to-do.³ In Petrocik's (1996) words:

Party constituency ownership of an issue is much more long-term ... 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. (p. 827)

Thus, parties' constituencies are an important source of issue ownership and the stronger the links between specific parties and social groups, the more we should expect them to be entrenched in the memories of voters across the political spectrum and, consequently, the more independent of the other sources of issue ownership we should expect them to be.

Footnote 1 continued

continually updated 'running tally' of the performance capabilities of competing parties" (Sanders et al. 2011, p. 290; cf. Fiorina 1981), this might challenge the classification of partisanship as an affective source of issue ownership. It would, however, challenge neither the effect nor the causal status of partisanship in the present context since the "running tally" exists prior to the evaluation of ownership of a given issue.

² For a dynamic analysis of issue ownership on the issue of crime, see Holian (2004).

³ Related work on perceptions of the social bases of parties include Key (1961, pp. 433–438), Miller et al. (1991), and Green et al. (2002); however, their work does not explicitly connect to parties' issue ownership.

In sum, we claim that four different individual level sources of issue ownership evaluations can be discerned: (1) partisanship, (2) attitudes, (3) perceptions of the societal development as indicating parties' performance, and (4) perceptions of linkages between specific parties and specific constituency groups. In the analyses, we include all four sources of ownership in multivariate models to determine their impact across a range of ownership evaluations. Throughout the analyses, we test four hypotheses—one for each source: H1 claims that voters accord issue ownership to parties with which they identify; H2 maintains that voters accord issue ownership to parties with which they agree on a given issue; H3 posits that voters accord issue ownership to parties that are seen as performing well on a given issue; H4, finally, claims that for well-established social group–party connections, the constituency component is a strong and independent source of ownership perceptions such that voters accord issue ownership to parties that are seen as connected to social groups particularly involved in a given issue. Finding support for H3 and H4, even when controlling for partisanship and attitudes, suggests that issue ownership is driven, at least in part, by voters' perceptions of characteristics of the parties (i.e., their performance and relationships with social groups) rather than being merely caused by voters' rationalizations from partisanship and attitudes.

The paper proceeds by presenting the data and discussing the operationalization of our measures and the methodological choices guiding the analyses. The first set of analyses then examines the impact of partisanship and attitudes as well as performance evaluations on issue ownership evaluations on the environment and law and order. Employing a set of novel indicators, attention is subsequently directed towards the impact of perceived linkages between parties and specific groups on the issues of taxation and (re-)distribution of wealth.

Data, Measures, and Modeling Strategy

The data for the analyses comes from the 2007 Danish National Election Study (DNES), a post-election survey of 4,018 respondents. 2,576 of these respondents were part of the standing online panel of TNS Gallup and took the survey online. Members of this standing panel are recruited through representative face-to-face and telephone surveys conducted by TNS Gallup with the aim of making the panel approximately representative of the adult Danish population. The remaining 1,442 respondents were recruited from a random sample of all Danes drawn from the Central Person Registry and interviewed by a mixture of face-to-face interviews and online and postal questionnaires. The response rate in the TNS Gallup online panel was 43, and the combined response rate in the other parts of the study was 32 (AAPOR RR1). The fieldwork was conducted November 2007 (the election was held on November 13) through June 2008; by March 1,

⁴ A valid concern is that online respondents differ from randomly selected respondents, for example by being more politically interested and, in turn, more consistent in their attitudes and evaluations. In our data, we find that online respondents are slightly more politically interested than respondents from the random sample (e.g., 30 % of online respondents say they are very interested in politics as compared to 21 % among the random sample). However, the results reported below are robust if we only include respondents from the random sample. Further information about the data is available from the authors upon request.

2008, 72 % of all respondents had completed the questionnaire. The data were subsequently weighted to be representative of the Danish electorate.⁴

Measures

Four issues have been chosen for the analyses. The issues cover both of the two core dimensions of Danish politics (Petersen et al. 2010; Stubager 2010), economic values (distribution of wealth in society and taxation) and cultural values (the environment and law and order) and are generally worded in broad terms so as to permit respondents to indicate their perception of ownership on the entire issue.⁵ Thus, *issue ownership perceptions* are captured by the following question: “Here is a list of problems and we’d like to hear who you think is better at solving each problem: a Social Democratic led government or a bourgeois government. Who is best at (securing law and order/securing the environment/securing a just distribution of wealth in society/keeping taxes down)?” The response categories were: “A Social Democratic led government,” “A bourgeois government,” or “No difference.”⁶

It is, thus, only possible for respondents to indicate which of the two major government alternatives that exist in Danish politics they see as more competent on a given issue. Unfortunately, this implies that some nuances in voters’ perceptions are lost since the different parties within the two blocs can be expected to be seen as owning different issues. While this is a limitation of the design, two factors serve to mitigate the problem. First, the general bloc structure of Danish politics, both at the level of voters and parties (Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005; Kosiara-Pedersen 2008), means that parties within each bloc tend to be located on the same side of most issues and policies (this also applies to the issues analyzed here). This means that even though issue ownership perceptions are tied to the individual parties, they generalize across the parties within a given bloc not least since the governments formed from a bloc typically relies on the support of all parties within the bloc to remain in office. Second, while one should expect the mechanisms connecting the four proposed sources to issue ownership to be stronger at the level of the individual party where all nuances can come into play, they should also be functioning at the level of the two government alternatives. In this light, the design results in a more

⁵ The wording of the taxation issue is a partial exception; however, see the discussion in the analysis section below.

⁶ In Danish the word “*borgerlig*” (bourgeois) is a widely used synonym for right wing used regardless of issue content. Throughout, “Don’t know” responses have been excluded from the analyses. The distribution of answers across the issues can be found in Table 7 in the appendix.

⁷ The original measure asked respondents whether they perceived themselves as adherents of a party, which one, and whether they were strong or not strong adherents. Respondents, who did not see themselves as adherents of a particular party, were subsequently asked whether they were closer to a party or not. To conform to the format of the issue ownership measures, responses for the individual parties were categorized into the left and right wing in the following way: The Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, the Socialist People’s Party, and the Red-Green Alliance formed the left wing while the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Danish People’s Party, New Alliance, and the Christian Democrats formed the right wing. The parties were classified based on whether they supported the Social Democratic or the bourgeois candidate for Prime Minister.

conservative test of the hypotheses due to the blurring entailed in the aggregation of parties into the two blocs.

Among the independent variables, *party identification* was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly left wing* to *strongly right wing*.⁷ To the extent that our expectations hold up, voters should accord issue ownership to the side with which they identify. Respondents' *attitudes* in the relevant domains were measured by a range of items. Whenever possible, multiple indicators from the same issue domain were combined into scales. The items used and the resulting scales are described in the appendix. We should expect those expressing a rightist attitude (that is, a preference for longer sentences to criminals, for industrial build-up rather than environmental protection, and for less redistribution and taxation) to point to right wing parties as issue owners and vice versa.

Indicators of voters' perceptions of social development and government *performance* come in a cued and an uncued version (cf. Borre 2001, pp. 62, 115; Heath et al. 1985, p. 90).⁸ The uncued asks respondents, "How do you think the situation is with (the environment/law and order) in Denmark compared to 3 years ago?" (the five response categories range from "*Much better*" to "*Much worse*"). This format was available for the environment and law and order. The cued version asks respondents, "How do you think the government of Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Prime minister of the previous government) has handled the following areas in the last 3 years?" Among the issues listed were the environment, crime, the social inequality (i.e., (re)-distribution), and taxes. This format is, hence, available for all four issues (the five response categories range from "*Very well*" to "*Very badly*").

For the present purpose, the uncued version appears best suited since the cued version risks inflating the relationship between performance evaluations and issue ownership perceptions by virtue of the strong cue entailed in framing the question around the conduct of the government, which could increase partisan reasoning (ibid.; see also Mondak 1993; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010). However, since the uncued version is not available for all issues, we have to rely on the cued version on the taxation and distribution issues. Fortunately, both versions are available for the environment and law and order, thereby permitting a comparison of the effects of the two versions of performance evaluations (discussed below). Since the right wing occupied government office before the 2007 election (as well, incidentally, as after the election), we should expect respondents with positive performance perceptions to point to the right wing as owning a given issue and vice versa.

Respondents' perceptions of the *parties' constituencies* have been measured by means of a novel set of items specifically designed to tap the perceived linkages between specific social groups and political parties. The questions were posed in relation to two groups that have figured prominently in the economic distributional conflict that has been at the core of Danish politics for the largest part of the past century (cf. Stubager 2003, 2010): the lowest income groups and the well-off. For each group, the question ran: "Which party do you think best represents (the lowest income groups/the well-off)?" The response categories included all nine parties, and

⁸ The two versions are also referred to as, respectively, "mediated" and "unmediated."

⁹ The distribution of responses on the two items can be found in Table 7 in the appendix.

Table 1 Overview of expected sources of issue ownership

Source of issue ownership	Hypotheses	Operationalization
Partisanship	H1: Voters accord issue ownership to parties with which they identify.	Party identification, measured on a 7-point scale where 0 indicates strong identification with party on the left wing, and 1 indicates strong identification with party on the right wing.
Attitudes	H2: Voters accord issue ownership to parties with which they agree on a given issue.	Issue attitudes, typically measured with multi-item scales relating to each of the four relevant issues, where 0 indicates most left wing attitudes, and 1 indicates most right wing attitudes.
Performance evaluations	H3: Voters accord issue ownership to parties that are seen as performing well on a given issue.	Perceptions of societal developments (uncued measures) or government performance (cued measures) on an issue, where 0 indicates the most negative and hence left wing perception (given the incumbent right wing government), and 1 indicates the most positive or right wing perception.
Constituency	H4: Voters accord issue ownership to parties that are seen as connected to social groups particularly involved in a given issue.	Perceptions of which party best represents specific groups in society (we focus on the lowest income groups and the well-off, respectively), where 0 indicates best represented by left wing parties, and 1 indicates best represented by right wing parties.

responses were subsequently dichotomized into the left and right wing as described above.⁹ Given the economic discrepancy between the two groups, linkages between them and specific parties should primarily be related to issue ownership on taxation and (re-)distribution. Unfortunately, measures of linkages between parties and groups relevant for the other issues were not included in the survey. Therefore, the linkage perceptions are only included in the analysis for the two former issues.

The expectations regarding the effect of voters' linkage perceptions derive from the precise framing of the (re-)distribution and taxation issues. On the former, respondents were asked which government alternative is better at "securing a just distribution of wealth in society." In the Danish context, this framing highlights the plight of economically disadvantaged groups. Consequently, we should expect parties perceived as linked to the lowest income groups to be seen as owning this issue. On taxation, the respondents were asked which alternative is better at "keeping taxes down". This framing, in contrast, highlights the plight of the taxpayers, particularly those paying the high Danish marginal taxes on high incomes (up to 60 %). Therefore, we should expect parties perceived as linked to the well-off to be seen as owning this issue. Table 1 provides an overview of our expectations about the four proposed sources of issue ownership and their measurement.

Modeling Strategy

With a dependent variable with three unordered categories, the natural choice of statistical model is multinomial logistic regression. All independent variables were entered as interval level variables in the analysis.¹⁰ In the tables below, we present the logistic regression coefficient for each variable for the contrast of pointing to the bourgeois rather than the Social Democratic government alternative as best at handling a given issue. In addition, we present the value of Nagelkerke's R^2 and the two information indices AIC and BIC as measures of the relative explanatory powers of the variables (cf. the procedure in Clarke et al. 2009; Sanders et al. 2011).¹¹ To facilitate interpretation of the substantive strength of the results, we also show the marginal effects of the variables on the predicted probabilities of according issue ownership to each of the two main alternatives. All independent variables in the analyses are coded to range between 0 and 1 with 1 being the most right wing answer. This implies that positive coefficients provide support for the expectations.

In accordance with the theoretical discussion above, we should expect partisanship to have a strong impact on ownership perceptions. Therefore, to substantiate our claims about the independent relevance of the other three sources, we need to control for party identification in all models estimated. Additionally, this strategy has the advantage of controlling away any relationship between the three other proposed sources and issue ownership arising due to any tendency for partisans' to rationalize their ownership perceptions by adjusting their answers to the other questions accordingly (cf. also below). In modeling terms, we have implemented this strategy by entering party identification alone in Model I; the other three sources are added separately to party identification in four versions of Model II in order to gauge their impact net of that of the others: In Model IIa, attitudes are added to the model; in Model IIb, attitudes are replaced by uncued performance evaluations; in Model IIc, cued performance evaluations are entered instead; and for (re-)distribution and taxation, Model IId enters the perceived linkages between social groups and political parties. All four sources of issue ownership perceptions—party identification, attitudes, performance evaluations,¹² and perceived group–party linkages (only for (re-)distribution and taxation)—are then entered together in Model III.

Before launching into the analyses, it is relevant to assess the validity of our measures of the four proposed sources of issue ownership by investigating their independence from one another. As is clear in Table 2, the variables are only moderately correlated with each other, and sometimes the correlations are minor. For example, correlations between party identification and attitudes are in the range from $r = .36$ to $r = .42$, except the correlation on the (re-)distribution issue which

¹⁰ Similar results are obtained if they are entered as categorical variables.

¹¹ Whereas Nagelkerke's R^2 can be, roughly, interpreted as the standard R^2 from OLS models, smaller values of both AIC and BIC indicate higher explanatory power. While, on the one hand, it is not possible to perform significance tests on AIC and BIC, they are, on the other hand, suited for comparison of non-nested models which makes them ideal for our purposes (cf. below).

¹² Where possible, the uncued version of performance evaluations is used in the combined model.

Table 2 Correlations of four sources of issue ownership

	Party identification	Attitudes	Uncued performance evaluation	Cued performance evaluation	Representation of lowest income groups
The environment					
Attitudes	.40***				
Uncued performance evaluation	.39***	.33***			
Cued performance evaluation	.52***	.42***	.67***		
Law and order					
Attitudes	.42***				
Uncued performance evaluation	.07***	-.15***			
Cued performance evaluation	.32***	.05**	.52***		
(Re-)distribution					
Attitudes	.53***				
Cued performance evaluation	.64***	.56***	–		
Representation of lowest income groups	.33***	.16***	–	.27***	
Representation of the well-off	.04***	.04**	–	-.02	-.06***
Taxation					
Attitudes	.36***				
Cued performance evaluation	.52***	.28***	–		
Representation of lowest income groups	.33***	.10***	–	.20***	
Representation of the well-off	.04***	.06***	–	.03	-.06***

Note. Entries are Pearson's r . N s for the four sub-tables are 3,866, 3,920, 3,700, and 3,696

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. – not available

is somewhat higher ($r = .53$). Given how tightly correlated partisanship and attitudes are often considered to be (e.g., Clarke et al. 2009), these correlations cannot be said to be strong. Partisanship also correlates with performance evaluations, although to varying degrees. The strongest correlation is found between party identification and cued evaluations on the (re-)distribution issue, but even here party identification only explains around 40 % of the variation in performance evaluations. The correlations between attitudes and performance evaluations are generally modest, with the correlation between distribution attitudes and the cued performance evaluation on (re-)distribution as an exception. The only consistently high correlations are found between the cued and uncued performance evaluations, which should hardly be surprising since they are intended to measure similar developments, though linking them more or less explicitly to the government. The main conclusion to be drawn from Table 2 is thus that partisanship, attitudes, and performance evaluations are only moderately correlated, indicating that the variables measure related but distinct phenomena.

Since the constituency source of issue ownership has not played a role in previous studies of issue ownership, it is particularly instructive to explore how perceptions of the linkage between social groups and the parties are correlated with partisanship, attitudes, and performance evaluations. This will provide insight into the degree to which the former have any independence vis-à-vis the latter. It might be expected, that is, that partisans point to their own party as the best representative of any group; after all, since partisans tend to see their party as generally best for society, it is a small step to also see it as best at representing specific groups in society. Likewise, those who find that the government (i.e., the right wing) has handled the issue of social inequality well (which in a Danish context for most people would be equivalent to reducing inequality) should see it as a better representative of the lowest income groups while those who think it has handled the issue badly should see it as a better representative of the well-off (see Mutz and Mondak 1997). For attitudes, it is less clear what patterns could be expected. Yet, as can be seen in the table, partisanship turns out to be only moderately correlated with perceptions of who is the best representative of the social groups in question ($r = .33$); and performance evaluations, despite being cued (i.e., explicitly referring to the government), have still weaker correlations with the linkage perceptions whereas attitudes are almost unrelated to these perceptions. These results are remarkable and clearly suggest that perceptions of group–party linkages are distinct from partisanship, attitudes and performance evaluations. Next, we examine how these alternative sources might influence parties' issue ownership.

The Usual Suspects: Party Identification, Attitudes, and Performance Evaluations

For the first set of analyses, we take advantage of two issues on which indicators for both party identification, attitudes, as well as uncued and cued performance evaluations are available. In particular, the comparison of the two latter indicators is instructive for the following analyses where only the cued version is available. The

Table 3 The role of party identification, political attitudes, and performance evaluations as sources of issue ownership perceptions on the environment and law and order

	Model I	Model IIa	Model IIb	Model IIc	Model III
Securing the environment					
Constant	-4.20 (0.19)***	-4.95 (0.21)***	-5.70 (0.28)***	-6.34 (0.28)***	-6.23 (0.30)***
Party identification	5.62 (0.26)***	5.18 (0.27)***	5.18 (0.27)***	4.46 (0.28)***	4.86 (0.27)***
Attitude	-	2.30 (0.30)***	-	-	1.99 (0.30)***
Uncued performance evaluation	-	-	3.41 (0.39)***	-	3.08 (0.40)***
Cued performance evaluation	-	-	-	5.52 (0.41)***	-
Nagelkerke's R^2	.36	.39	.39	.44	.41
AIC	6329	6183	6175	5897	6072
BIC	6354	6221	6212	5935	6122
Securing law and order					
Constant	-1.52 (0.12)***	-2.48 (0.20)***	-2.06 (0.16)***	-2.43 (0.18)***	-3.37 (0.26)***
Party identification	6.06 (0.29)***	5.72 (0.30)***	6.05 (0.29)***	5.77 (0.30)***	5.63 (0.30)***
Attitude	-	1.60 (0.29)***	-	-	1.94 (0.30)***
Uncued performance evaluation	-	-	1.64 (0.34)***	-	2.09 (0.36)***
Cued performance evaluation	-	-	-	2.84 (0.36)***	-
Nagelkerke's R^2	.33	.35	.34	.36	.36
AIC	6447	6393	6416	6305	6343
BIC	6472	6430	6454	6342	6393

Note. Data from 2007 Danish National Election Study. *N*s are 3,829 and 3,850, respectively, for the two analyses. The dependent variable asks respondents who is better at handling the issue: a Social Democratic led government (reference category), a bourgeois government or is there no difference. Cell entries are the logistic regression coefficient for the contrast between a Social Democratic and a bourgeois government with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are coded such that higher values indicate more right-wing responses; this implies that positive coefficients support the expectations

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. - variable not included in the model

results for the two issues—the environment and law and order—are presented in Table 3.

The pattern of results is highly similar across both issues. Thus, the far and away strongest individual level source of issue ownership perceptions is a person's party identification. This is evident from the direction (i.e., those identified with the right wing tend to point to their own side as owning the issues and vice versa) and size of the coefficients for party identification and from the modest increase in Nagelkerke's R^2 , and the small decreases in AIC and BIC, when the other variables are added to the model. A second observation is that, overall, attitudes and uncued performance evaluations appear as almost equally strong sources of issue ownership, and they both have the expected relationship with the ownership perceptions (i.e., those, who hold right wing attitudes or think the social development has been positive, point to the right wing as owning the issues and vice versa). This is evident from comparing, for Models IIa and b, the changes in Nagelkerke's R^2 , AIC and BIC from Model I. It is also evident from comparing Models IIa and b with Model III where all three sources are included alongside each other (see also the discussion of predicted probabilities below).¹³

However, for both issues it applies that when comparing Models IIa and c, we find that cued performance evaluations have a larger impact on ownership perceptions than attitudes (cf. the standard errors). This result probably reflects the strength of the cue entailed in the cued performance evaluation questions that refer directly to the government's handling of the issue (cf. Borre 2001; Heath et al. 1985); it is little surprise that such measures are more strongly related to ownership perceptions than measures that do not mention the government. This tendency for the cued indicators to inflate the impact of performance evaluations should be kept in mind for the following analyses where only the cued version is available.

To aid the substantive interpretation of the logistic regression coefficients, Table 4 presents the predicted marginal effects of each source of issue ownership as measured by the change in the predicted probability of a specific ownership perception as each source variable changes from its minimum to its maximum. Across both issues, the large impact of party identification is evident. On the environmental issue, for example, moving from strong identification with a party on the left to strong identification with a party on the right decreases the likelihood of pointing to a Social Democratic government as the most competent in handling the issue by 65 percentage points and increases the likelihood of perceiving a bourgeois government as most competent by 44 percentage points. Likewise, when moving from the most left wing to the most right wing attitude towards the environment, the probability of perceiving a Social Democratic government as most competent decreases by 43 percentage points. The marginal effects of performance evaluations are even larger on this issue. Thus, respondents evaluating the environmental development as most positive are 50 percentage points less likely to point to a

¹³ Since the two models are not nested, a formal comparison of the coefficients is not possible. However, on law and order, the sizes of the standard errors of the estimates for attitude and uncued performance evaluations are such that the 95 % confidence intervals around each coefficient do not contain the value of the other coefficient; they are, in other words, different from each other. On the environment, the coefficients do not differ in this statistical sense, cf. also below.

Table 4 The role of party identification, political attitudes, and performance evaluations as sources of issue ownership perceptions on the environment and law and order

	Social democratic government Marginal effect (CI)	Bourgeois government Marginal effect (CI)
Securing the environment		
Party identification	−0.65 (−0.69; −0.61)	0.44 (0.39; 0.49)
Attitude	−0.43 (−0.52; −0.33)	0.15 (0.09; 0.21)
Uncued performance evaluation	−0.50 (−0.62; −0.38)	0.29 (0.20; 0.37)
Securing law and order		
Party identification	−0.40 (−0.45; −0.35)	0.60 (0.56; 0.64)
Attitude	−0.09 (−0.13; −0.05)	0.33 (0.24; 0.43)
Uncued performance evaluation	−0.17 (−0.25; −0.10)	0.24 (0.13; 0.34)

Note. Entries are the predicted marginal effects (and 95 % confidence intervals) on the probabilities of each government alternative being seen as best at handling each issue as the independent variable varies from its min to its max. The predictions are based on Model III in Table 3. Each entry is calculated for middle values on the non-varying variables

Social Democratic government as best at handling the environment as compared to respondents evaluating the development most negatively, again after controlling for party identification and attitudes. These patterns conform to the patterns of the regression coefficients discussed above.

In sum, the overall pattern emerging from Tables 3 and 4 is that all three sources considered have substantial impact on issue ownership perceptions. Clearly, party identification has the largest impact on ownership perceptions, but attitudes and performance evaluations also shape issue ownership to a considerable, if varying, extent. This result supports H1–3 and suggests that even though partisanship is a major ingredient in issue ownership perceptions, attitudes and performance evaluations still exert clearly significant impact on the dependent variable.

The Neglected Cousin: Party Constituencies as a Source of Issue Ownership

Against the background of the pervasive influence of party identification on ownership evaluations, as well as the smaller but still substantive contributions of attitudes and performance evaluations, the question naturally arises as to whether there is much more to add to the story. Or, in other words, whether the remaining ownership source—party constituencies, or the perceived linkages between specific social groups and specific parties—is in fact an independent source of issue ownership as proposed by H4.

We test whether parties' constituencies are a source of ownership perceptions by turning to the issues of taxation and (re-)distribution of wealth in society that connect to the different economic interests of the lowest income groups and the well-off (cf. above). Thus, in Table 5, respondents' perceptions of which political bloc best represents each of the two groups are included, along with the other three

Table 5 The role of party identification, political attitudes, performance evaluations, and perceived linkages between social groups and political parties as sources of issue ownership on distribution of wealth in society and taxation

	Model I	Model IIa	Model IIc	Model IId	Model III
Securing a just distribution of wealth in society					
Constant	-4.67 (0.22)***	-5.66 (0.31)***	-6.31 (0.29)***	-4.22 (0.39)***	-6.25 (0.48)***
Party identification	6.58 (0.31)***	6.14 (0.32)***	5.05 (0.34)***	6.22 (0.32)***	4.64 (0.35)***
Attitude	-	1.95 (0.38)***	-	-	0.43 (0.43)
Cued performance evaluation	-	-	5.62 (0.44)***	-	5.48 (0.48)***
Representation of lowest income groups	-	-	-	1.57 (0.18)***	1.58 (0.19)***
Representation of the well-off	-	-	-	-0.56 (0.35)	-0.36 (0.39)
Nagelkerke's R^2	.46	.46	.52	.48	.55
AIC	5496	5456	5129	5354	5013
BIC	5521	5493	5167	5403	5087
Keeping taxes down					
Constant	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.43 (0.14)**	-1.30 (0.18)***	-1.68 (0.29)***	-3.44 (0.35)***
Party identification	4.48 (0.35)***	4.12 (0.35)***	3.56 (0.39)***	4.35 (0.39)***	3.20 (0.43)***
Attitude	-	1.27 (0.25)***	-	-	0.96 (0.25)***
Cued performance evaluation	-	-	3.32 (0.37)***	-	3.27 (0.37)***
Representation of lowest income groups	-	-	-	0.86 (0.34)*	0.82 (0.34)*
Representation of the well-off	-	-	-	1.78 (0.28)***	1.90 (0.28)***
Nagelkerke's R^2	.26	.28	.32	.28	.35
AIC	5146	5089	4909	5084	4815
BIC	5170	5126	4946	5134	4889

Note. Data from 2007 Danish National Election Study. N s are 3,674 and 3,660, respectively, for the two analyses. The dependent variable asks respondents who is better at handling the issue: a Social Democratic led government (reference category), a bourgeois government or is there no difference. Cell entries are the logistic regression coefficient for the contrast between a Social Democratic and a bourgeois government with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are coded such that higher values indicate more right-wing responses; this implies that positive coefficients support the expectations. No uncued performance evaluations were available for the analyses
*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. - variable not included in the model

Table 6 The role of party identification, political attitudes, performance evaluations, and perceived linkages between social groups and political parties as sources of issue ownership on distribution of wealth in society and taxation

	Social democratic government Marginal effect (CI)	Bourgeois government Marginal effect (CI)
Securing a just distribution of wealth in society		
Party identification	-0.67 (-0.71; -0.63)	0.40 (0.33; 0.47)
Attitude	-0.05 (-0.21; 0.11)	0.05 (-0.04; 0.15)
Cued performance evaluation	-0.71 (-0.84; -0.59)	0.44 (0.34; 0.54)
Representation of lowest income groups	-0.31 (-0.38; -0.24)	0.18 (0.12; 0.24)
Representation of the well-off	0.10 (-0.05; 0.25)	-0.03 (-0.12; 0.06)
Keeping taxes down		
Party identification	-0.22 (-0.28; -0.17)	0.44 (0.38; 0.50)
Attitude	-0.06 (-0.10; -0.02)	0.15 (0.08; 0.22)
Cued performance evaluation	-0.17 (-0.23; -0.11)	0.51 (0.42; 0.60)
Representation of lowest income groups	-0.04 (-0.07; -0.01)	0.06 (-0.00; 0.12)
Representation of the well-off	-0.22 (-0.32; -0.12)	0.32 (0.21; 0.43)

Note. Entries are the predicted marginal effects (and 95 % confidence intervals) on the probabilities of each government alternative being seen as best at handling each issue as the independent variable varies from its min to its max. The predictions are based on Model III in Table 5. Each entry is calculated for middle values on party identification, attitudes and evaluations. For the two representation variables the values are fixed (except, of course, when exploring the effects of the two variables) at the most prevalent values: the left wing for the lowest income groups and the right wing for the well-off

sources of issue ownership, in models predicting ownership on the issues of keeping taxes down and securing a just distribution of wealth in society.

The table tells an interesting story. First of all, we may note that the general result regarding the large impact of partisanship on perceptions of issue ownership holds up also for the two issues investigated here.¹⁴ Likewise, we also find a pattern similar to that in Table 3 regarding the influence of attitudes and cued performance evaluations in the sense that both exert significant influences on ownership perceptions, and although the cued performance evaluations have a larger impact than attitudes (see the changes in AIC, BIC, and Nagelkerke's R^2), it still adds only little as compared to what party identification can explain on its own. Again, to aid substantive interpretation, we present the predicted marginal effects of the variables in Table 6. These marginal effects corroborate the large impact of party identification and small effects of attitudes. Also the cued performance evaluations have large effects on issue ownership perceptions, just as the cued evaluations had in Table 3.

However, Table 5 also reveals that voters' perceptions of the linkages between social groups and political parties clearly contribute to their perceptions of which party owns a given issue. Just as expected, that is, voters' perceptions of which party

¹⁴ Incidentally, this would seem to indicate that the worry raised in the measurement section above, that the taxation ownership item is worded too narrowly in the sense that it focuses on keeping taxes down, is unfounded. Thus, all four proposed sources perform as expected indicating that respondents have answered the taxation item on the same basis as the other three ownership items analyzed.

best represents the lowest income groups exerts an impact on their perceptions of who owns the issue of just distribution while perceived linkages to the well-off have no influence in this context. The reverse pattern is, again as expected, found on the issue of taxation. As explained, these relationships are based on the framing of the two ownership items that highlight the plight of, respectively, disadvantaged and advantaged groups in society.

The magnitude of the influence of constituency-based considerations on issue ownership perceptions is revealed by the marginal effects presented in Table 6. Perceptions of the group–party linkages generally have an effect on issue ownership, which is about half the effect size of party identification. In relation to securing a just distribution of wealth in society, for example, perceiving the right wing parties as the best representative of the lowest income groups decreases the likelihood of perceiving a Social Democratic government as most competent in handling the issue by 31 percentage points, whereas it increases the likelihood of perceiving the bourgeois government as best by 18 percentage points. A similar pattern is evident on the taxation issue; perceiving a right wing party as the best representative of the interests of the well-off decreases the likelihood of pointing to a Social Democratic government as most competent by 22 percentage points, while it increases the likelihood of perceiving a bourgeois government as most competent by 32 percentage points. Given the overall importance of party identification for voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership, these findings clearly speak to the relevance of the constituency source.

Thus, the results show that voters, who perceive a given party (bloc) as linked to the disadvantaged group of low income people, are influenced by this perception when answering the question about which party is best at securing a just distribution of wealth in society (i.e., something that would favor the economically disadvantaged) such that they tend to accord ownership to the party (bloc) seen as representing the group. A similar pattern exists with respect to the advantaged group of well-off people and the issue of taxation: if a respondent sees a linkage between the well-off and a given party (bloc), he or she tends to accord ownership over the issue of keeping taxes down (something that would benefit the economically advantaged) to that same party (bloc). Thereby, the results provide support for the proposition of H4 that voters' perceptions of parties' constituencies are an independent source of issue ownership. In addition, the analyses replicate on two different issues the results from Tables 3 and 4 that partisanship, performance evaluations, and (to a lesser extent) attitudes, contribute to voters' issue ownership perceptions.

This result is fully in line with Petrocik's (1996) perspective on the constituency source of issue ownership which he sees as arising out of voters' awareness of alliances between specific parties and groups. In the present case, left wing parties have a long history of speaking for the interests of economically disadvantaged groups in society such as (at least historically) the working class; indeed, the Social Democratic party for many years had direct, formal ties to trade unions. Likewise, the perceived linkage between the right wing and the well-off also accords well with the historical position of the two main right wing parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, in the sense that the Conservative party was established as the party of

large landowners and industrialists, while the Liberals grew out of the increasingly wealthy group of independent farmers. The results clearly indicate that the voters' knowledge of these (partly historical) alliances rather than, e.g., their party identification influences their perceptions of the linkages between the parties and the two groups in question.

Conclusion and Discussion

While issue ownership is often used as an explanatory variable predicting voting behavior (e.g., Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004; Green and Hobolt 2008; Sanders et al. 2011), few studies have addressed where voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership come from. This is the first study to bring together four different potential sources of parties' issue ownership and assess their relative merit. Overall, the analyses provide support for our four hypotheses. Thus, all four sources of issue ownership—partisanship, attitudes, performance evaluations, and party constituencies—have been found to exert independent, if varying, influence on voters' issue ownership perceptions. Across the four issues analyzed, partisanship proved to be the strongest source of issue ownership: People are inclined to perceive the party with which they identify as more competent at handling any specific issue. In addition, attitudes also shaped issue ownership perceptions to some extent, although the results were more mixed as attitudes had a moderately strong impact on issue ownership on some issues (e.g., the environment) but much less or no influence on other issues (e.g., redistribution). Whereas the current study did not illuminate the processes underlying these effects, the findings are entirely consistent with the idea of partisanship as a “perceptual screen” (Bartels 2002; Campbell et al. 1960) as well as recent work on motivated reasoning and voter rationalization (Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Yet, our findings clearly indicate that issue ownership is more than merely an expression of partisanship and attitudes. How citizens judge real-world developments such as the crime rate or the environment is related in meaningful ways to how they judge the competencies of political parties and government alternatives, even when attitudes and partisanship are taken into account. Thus, even the uncued performance evaluations (i.e., measured in a way not explicitly referring to the government) had a substantial impact on issue ownership perceptions. More importantly, we also found support for the hypothesis that perceptions of linkages between social groups and parties are an independent source of issue ownership. The constituency source appears to explain a considerable amount of variation in issue ownership perceptions; on the two issues we have been able to analyze here (i.e., redistribution and tax policy), the effects (as measured by changes in predicted probabilities) of the constituency source was about half the size of party identification. Accordingly, even though group–party linkages do not match partisanship in magnitude as a source of issue ownership, parties' long-term constituency basis indeed does appear to influence voters' assessments of party competences in handling issues. In this respect, the analyses can contribute to giving this source of issue ownership its due attention.

That issue ownership is shaped by factors beyond partisanship and attitudes raises the possibility that political communication in the form of media messages or strategic communication from political actors can influence voters' issue ownership perceptions. Thus, if performance evaluations explain issue ownership even when controlling partisanship, the news media and political entrepreneurs might be able to influence parties' issue ownership through their depiction and interpretation of real-world developments and how they attribute responsibility to political parties. Likewise, party leaders might be able to change long-term group–party linkages by attempting to establish connections between societal groups and their party (e.g., by rhetorically linking their party to specific groups). Extant research has only begun to explore such dynamics in parties' issue ownership (e.g., Walgrave and de Swert 2007; Walgrave et al. 2009). However, our results are promising in the sense that they suggest parties' issue ownership has sources beyond partisanship and attitudes.

Like any other study, ours has some limitations that should be noticed. Thus, as discussed above, we had to collapse the Danish multiparty system into just two competing blocs—the left wing and the right wing. This entails a loss of nuances and, consequently, explanatory power since issue ownerships are typically associated with specific parties rather than blocs of parties. As argued, this analytical simplification entailed in the present analyses makes them a more conservative test of the proposed hypotheses. In this light, the results seem to gain extra weight. A logical next step, though, is to examine the effects of the four sources at the level of the individual party as done, for example, in the Belgian case by Walgrave and colleagues (*ibid.*). At the individual party level, we suspect that the uncovered mechanisms should be even stronger. Further, we see no reason why similar results should not apply in other countries with stable, long-standing democracies. Thus, the four sources can be expected (with due adjustment to the specific context, of course) to also operate in other political systems where political allegiances have had time to form. In this context, we may speculate that the constituency source has a stronger effect in multiparty systems where parties can have more differentiated origins and appeals and, for this reason, tighter connections to specific social groups. This is a topic for further research along the lines set out here.

Such future studies may also expand on the constituency source of ownership in another way. In the present study, we have focused on the connections between parties and on only two out of the infinite number of social and other groups present in modern societies. An obvious research question would be, thus, whether it is possible to find similar relationships for other groups or, for that matter, for variations over the groups included in our study. What role does, for example, perceived linkages between parties and business groups or trade unions imply for issue ownership perceptions? And do such perceptions vary, for example, depending on whether we talk about “the lowest income groups,” as in this study, or “welfare recipients” (that might, at least in some welfare states, constitute a large part of the lowest income groups)? Based on Petrocik's (1996) original work, we expect other group–party linkages to play roles similar to the ones uncovered here, but naturally, this will need confirmation. Likewise, we should expect the framing of such linkages—including the description of the groups—to affect their effects on issue ownership. To the extent that this is so, it might even be justified to talk of a dynamic component of what is

otherwise thought of as a highly stable source of issue ownership. On this background, by identifying the influence of all four sources of issue ownership, we hope to pave the way for further research into what appears a central aspect of the relationship between voters and parties in modern, democratic societies.

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Appendix

Measures of respondents' attitudes.

For the environment, law and order, and social inequality, the various items were collected in scales. All measures run from 0 to 1 with 1 being the most rightist position.

The Environment:

- Economic growth should be ensured by expanding industry, even if this is at the cost of environmental interests.
- Measures to improve the environment should not go so far as to damage business conditions.

The five response categories range from *completely agree* to *completely disagree*. The two items correlate at $r = -.56$.

Law and Order:

- Violent crimes should be punished much harder than is currently the case (response categories as above).

Table 7 Distribution of answers on perceived issue ownership and group–party linkages

	Left wing	Right wing	No difference	PDI
The environment	51	20	29	–31
Law and order	15	46	39	31
Taxation	11	69	20	58
Just distribution	53	23	25	–33
The lowest income groups	80	20	–	–60
The well-off	6	94	–	88

Note. Entries are percentages. Percentage Difference Index (PDI) is calculated by subtracting the score for the left wing from that for the right wing. For the first four items, respondents are asked who is better at handling the issue: a Social Democratic led government, a bourgeois government or if there is no difference. For the two last items, respondents were asked which party is best at representing each group. The response categories included all parties, and the responses were dichotomized into the left and right wing, respectively. *Ns* range from 3,693 to 3,867

- Some parties are in favor of maintaining law and order by means of stiffer sentences. Other parties, instead, talk about preventing crime and treating criminals humanely. Where would you place yourself on this scale where 1 stands for those who are most in favor of law and order while 5 stands for those who are most in favor of prevention and humanly treatment of criminals.

The two items correlate at $r = .48$.

Social Inequality:

- In politics, one should strive to assure the same economic conditions for everyone, regardless of education and employment (response categories as above).
- To create dynamism and progress in society, one has to accept a certain measure of inequality (response categories as above).
- Because people's abilities differ, it is natural to accept a certain inequality (response categories as above).
- A certain measure of inequality is desirable as there are differences in people's efforts (response categories as above).
- Some parties are in favor of extensive equality while others think that inequality is necessary to create dynamism in society. Where would you place yourself on this scale where 1 stands for those who are in favor of extensive equality and 5 stands for those who think that inequality is necessary to create dynamism in society.

The intercorrelations (r) between the items range from .33 to .74. A scale of all five items has a Cronbach's α of .84.

Taxation:

- High incomes should be taxed more than is currently the case (response categories as above).

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