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Issue ownership and issue salience effects: A two-stage model of the voting decision process

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Abstract

Parties are often associated with specific issues. They are said to 'own' an issue when they develop a reputation of competence and attention in that domain. They can also strategically emphasize specific issues in their campaign. This paper investigates the consequences of such associations for the voting decision process. I suggest that voters evaluate different parties on the basis of different issues, depending on these associations. I test these ideas by relying on a two-stage model of the voting decision process, distinguishing between an evaluation stage and a choice stage. Results for the 1994 and 1998 Dutch elections clearly show that parties are not evaluated using the same set of criteria. The impact of issue preferences varies strongly across parties. The results also show that this variation is related to issue ownership. Issue salience, by contrast, does not seem to affect the criteria by which voters evaluate parties.

Introduction

Political issues and ideological orientations are central explanatory factors in many models of voting choice. They also take a key position in theories of political representation. Congruence between the issue preferences of citizens and the positions of their representatives is seen as an important condition for an effective system of political representation (Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; Powell 2004). The impact of issue preferences on voting choices is most often analyzed in the framework of spatial models of electoral competition (Enelow and Hinich 1984, 1990; Merrill and Grofman 1999). Following the tradition of Downs (1957), such models rest on the central assumption that voting choices are influenced by the relative positions of voters and parties in the political space. Various specifications have been suggested of how citizens compare their own preferences to the positions advocated by parties (e.g., Adams et al. 2005; Kedar 2005). But virtually all spatial models share one central assumption: Voters evaluate all parties with the same set of criteria. This fits with a conception of the voting decision process where citizens choose among the competing alternatives at one given moment, by evaluating them on the basis of the same 'vote function'. In such a model, each citizen has a fixed set of criteria with which all parties are evaluated. If voters' attitudes towards immigration, for instance, influence their voting choice, they will matter to the same degree for all parties. A given increase in the voter-party distance on that issue dimension will have the same effect, whatever the party.

I suggest here an alternative conception of the voting decision process and of the role played by issue positions. I argue that the criteria influencing citizens' evaluations of parties *may vary across parties*. Some issues may matter more to explain support for some parties than for others. Turning again to the example of attitudes towards immigration, voters' preferences in that matter may strongly influence their support for a right-wing populist party, but be of less importance to explain how they stand to other party families. Similarly, preferences in the domain of environmental protection may be central for evaluating Green parties, but not for Liberals or Conservatives. In other words, I suggest that voters do not necessarily apply the same set of criteria for evaluating all parties. This paper develops this conception of the voting decision process and of the role of issue preferences. I show that it requires adopting a two-stage conception of the voting-decision process (e.g., van der Eijk et al. 2006), that distinguishes between an *evaluation stage* and a *choice stage*.

I suggest further that the expected variation across parties in the impact of issues should be related to party characteristics. Following the salience theory of party competition (Budge and

Farlie 1983a, 1983b) and the issue ownership model (Petrocik 1996), most parties should be associated with specific issues in voters' minds. These associations are the product of their performance in office, of the traditional interests of their core electorate, and of their issue emphases during electoral campaigns. Social-democratic parties, for instance, may be associated to welfare state issues, a long-standing priority of these parties and of their traditional core clientele, the working class. Green parties, on the other hand, are likely to be associated with environmental issues, as they have emphasized over years this issue as their top priority.

The next two sections develop this model in more detail. I first introduce the two-stage conception of the voting decision process. Then, I discuss why party-issue associations should matter and which characteristics of parties or of the campaign are likely to drive them. My hypotheses are tested by combining individual-level data from the 1994 and 1998 Dutch election studies with additional data on parties' issue emphases. I introduce these datasets in section four, along with the specification of my statistical model. The results are presented in the following two sections. They offer strong support for the hypothesis of cross-party variation in the impact of issues. They also reveal a strong impact of issue ownership: The relationship between voters' issue preferences and their voting propensities for a given party is stronger for the issues owned by this party than for other issues. The salience with which parties address issues in their electoral programme or during the campaign, by contrast, does not have such an impact. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for the analysis of electoral competition.

The voting decision process: one-stage or two-stage?

The voting decision process is usually conceived as a parallel evaluation of the competing parties. In this conception, the formation of party preferences (on the basis of issues or other criteria) and the decision which party to vote for are not modelled separately. There is no distinction between the evaluation and choice stages. In this framework, thus, it makes little sense to argue that voters evaluate different parties on the basis of different criteria. By definition, if a criterion is relevant for one of the choice alternatives, it must also play a role for the other parties. 'Each voter will compare the package offered by the candidate with that offered by his opponent(s) and vote for the candidate whose package is most favorably evaluated. Viewed in simplest spatial terms, the voter will cast his vote for the candidate

"closest" to him in a space that describes all the factors that are of concern to the voter' (Enelow and Hinich 1984: 3). Voting choice is conceived as the product of a direct comparison of the parties on a fixed set of criteria. This conception implies that issues' impact has the character of a zero-sum game. The sum of the probabilities of choosing any of the choice alternatives is always equal to 1. In a two-party system, this means that anything which may increase the preference for one of the parties must at the same time and to the same extent reduce the preference for the second party. If a voter's profile leads him or her to support party A more strongly than the average voter, his or her probability to support party B will be comparatively lower than average. The same type of constraints characterizes models of voting choice in multiparty contexts. If a change in the issue preference of a voter increases the probability to vote for one of the parties, it must reduce the chances to support other parties. For each explanatory factor, positive and negative effects on the predicted voting probabilities will sum to zero.

These constraints in the impact of issues are not reconcilable with my hypothesis of cross-party heterogeneity. This hypothesis requires adopting a *two-stage model* of the voting-decision (Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al. 2006; Rosema 2006; van der Brug et al. 2007; see also Lau and Redlawsk 2006). This means distinguishing conceptually and empirically between an *evaluation stage* and a *choice stage*. Voters first form evaluations of the different parties. This determines their 'voting propensities' for these parties.[1] In a second stage, citizens decide which party to support, on the basis of their voting propensities. It is usually expected that voters will support the party for which their voting propensity is highest. Voting propensities can be measured directly and offer more detailed information on voters' preferences than voting choice (Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al. 2006). Most important for the purpose of this paper, however, is that a two-stage model allows relaxing the assumption of a parallel evaluation of parties. Once *evaluation* and *choice* are viewed as distinct stages, it becomes possible to examine whether different criteria are used to evaluate different choice alternatives. Citizens' propensity to support the Greens could depend mainly on environmental issues, while their voting propensity for a Conservative party may depend more strongly on their view towards cultural liberalism or towards taxation. In the next section, I discuss why such party-issue associations are likely, and why they should be relevant to explaining the formation of voting propensities.

[1] The concept of 'voting propensity' is sometimes referred to as a 'party utility' or 'electoral utility' (Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al. 1996, 2006).

Ownership and saliency effects

Associations between parties and issues have been emphasized by various authors in the field of electoral research. This idea is for example central to the 'saliency theory' of electoral competition and to the 'issue ownership theory' (Budge and Farlie 1983b; Petrocik 1996). The saliency theory of party competition is based on the idea that parties strategically choose which issues to emphasize in their campaign. 'Parties […] do not compete by arguing directly with each other, but by trying to render their own areas of concern most prominent' (Budge and Farlie 1983b: 23). This strategic behaviour is linked with associations between parties and issues. Parties are usually perceived as being more competent on some issues than others. Many issues are thus associated with specific parties – the welfare state with the Social-Democrats or defence with conservative parties, for instance. A related account of the nature of party competition is suggested by Petrocik's 'issue ownership theory' (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). It argues that parties have a reputation at being particularly good at handling specific issues. Parties seek to give more importance to these issues in voters' decisions, by emphasizing them during the campaign (Petrocik 1996). As in the work of Budge and Farlie, the existence of party-issue associations is central to the theory of Petrocik. Such associations between parties and issues should matter for explaining voting propensities, as they may affect the *accessibility* of specific issues in voters' memory. Attitudes that are frequently activated, or that have been activated recently, have a higher degree of accessibility (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). They are more likely to impact on voters' evaluations of parties, candidates, or of other political actors. If a party or candidate is frequently put in relation with a given issue, this issue should have a strong impact on the evaluation of the corresponding party. This expected mechanism has some similarity to that underlying the issue ownership model. The latter theory rests on the idea that parties' issue emphases 'prime their salience in the decisional calculus of the voters' (Petrocik et al. 2003: 599). From the point of view of issue ownership, however, these effects of party-issue associations are not party specific. They are expected to influence the vote function that voters apply to all parties. The model I advocate here differs by arguing that associations between a party and issues should matter only for explaining the voting propensity *for that specific party*.

To specify further my hypotheses, it is necessary to discuss in more detail the nature and origin of these party-issue associations. What leads to the emergence of such associations? How can they be influenced? Petrocik (1996) defines issue ownership as an issue-handling reputation. '"Handling" is the ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a

reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems' (Petrocik 1996: 826). Petrocik distinguishes between two sources for these party-issue associations: the traditional preferences of parties' constituencies, which are relatively stable and result into long-term associations, and parties' record while in office, which generates more fluid short-term associations (Petrocik 1996; see also Bellucci 2006). The first type of associations is a consequence of social cleavages, where parties articulate the interests of a relatively homogeneous social group, while the short-term associations depend on parties' competence.

The media are likely to play an important role in creating or reinforcing such associations between parties and issues. We know from research on priming effects that the media influence which issues are salient for voters, or which ones they consider to be important (Iyengar et al. 1982; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Johnston et al. 1992; Miller and Krosnick 2000). This, in turn, affects the issues voters rely most strongly on when evaluating political actors. The political issues, as well as the associations between parties and issues, which are emphasized by the media should be more easily accessible for voters, and they should have a stronger impact on their evaluations (Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1988, 1990). This is due to an 'accessibility bias', that is, 'the general tendency of individuals to attach greater weight to considerations that are, for whatever reason, momentarily prominent or salient' (Iyengar 1990: 168). On salient issues, voters are also more likely to perceive large differences between the positions of the competing parties (Krosnick 1988). If electoral choice really corresponds to a two-stage process, then, I would expect the evaluations of a given party to be more strongly influenced by the salient issues of that party. The relative impact of issues on party evaluations should vary across parties, as a function of the salience with which these issues are addressed by the corresponding party during the campaign.

Finally, in addition to issue ownership and issue salience, variability in the determinants of party preferences may also be linked with parties' *issue positions*. I expect the impact of a given issue on party evaluations to be larger for parties taking more extreme positions. A related hypothesis has been discussed in the literature regarding the *overall* impact of ideology and of issue dimensions. The higher the level of party system polarization on a given dimension is, the stronger is the impact of that dimension on voting decisions. This has been shown with respect to both the left-right dimension (van der Eijk et al. 2005; Lachat 2008) and more specific issues (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Knutsen and Kumlin 2005). This effect can be related to the salience of the corresponding issue dimensions. Alvarez and Nagler (2004), for example, argue that parties will invest less effort in communicating their issue

stances on topics where they do not diverge from other parties. In such cases, voters should be less certain of the party position and the corresponding issue or ideological dimension should be less accessible when making evaluations (Knutsen and Kumlin 2005). I expect a similar effect at the level of voting propensities for specific parties. Voting propensities should be more strongly influenced by issues where the corresponding party's position is rather extreme.

To sum up my hypotheses, I expect the impact of issue dimensions on voting propensities to vary across parties. The impact of a given issue should be larger for parties that are frequently associated with that issue. I will consider three (direct or indirect) indicators of party-issue associations: issue ownership, the salience of issues in parties' campaigns, and the extremity of parties' issue positions. The next section introduces the data with which these hypotheses will be tested.

Data and methods

To analyze the variability across parties in the impact of issues, I rely on data from the 1994 and 1998 Dutch election studies (Anker and Oppenhuis 1997; Aarts et al. 1999). Several reasons have guided this choice. First of all, an important consideration is that the hypotheses can only be meaningfully tested if there are enough relevant cases, that is, 'party × issue' combinations. Furthermore, there should be enough variation in the relevant party characteristics, that is, in their issue priorities and. These requirements are best met by considering a multiparty system, structured by several issue dimensions. Then, of course, this variety must be reflected in the corresponding election studies. At the individual level, I need measures of voters' positions on several issue dimensions, of their perception of party positions on these issues, and of the voting propensities for the corresponding parties. At the party level, I need information on the issue associations.

Data from the 1994 and 1998 Dutch election studies fare well on all of these criteria. The surveys included questions on voters' positions and on their perceptions of party positions for six or seven issue dimensions. Indicators of issue ownership are also available. In 1994, respondents were invited to mention which party in their opinion had the best ideas to solve each of a series of problems. In 1998, voters were asked how important each of a series of issues was for the different parties. Finally, additional data sources are available that provide

information on parties' issue priorities, either in their electoral programmes (Budge et al. 2001) or in the media during the campaign (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008).

A last important reason for investigating this election is linked with the measurement of the dependent variable. As emphasized in the introduction, it is essential to have direct measures of voting propensities, rather than a simple measure of voting choice. Such measures are available in a large number of national election studies, in various forms such as like/dislike scales, questions on the degree of sympathy, thermometer ratings, or probabilities of future vote. While all of these questions measure the 'attractiveness' of parties, they are not equivalent to one another. As van der Eijk and Marsh (2007) have shown, the questions on 'probabilities of future vote' fare better than alternative measures on several central criteria (see also van der Eijk et al. 2006; Tillie 1995). In particular, probabilities of future vote display a stronger relationship with actual vote choice (van der Eijk and Marsh 2007: 11-14). This aspect is central, as I expect the voting propensities to be the basis on which the actual voting choice is made.

Probabilities of future vote were measured with the following set of questions:

> *Some people are quite certain that they will always vote for the same party. Others reconsider each time to which party they will give their vote. I will mention a number of parties. Would you indicate for each party how probable it is that you will ever vote for that party? Tell me the number that applies to the party. If you do not know a party or if you do not know the answer, do not hesitate to say so and we will continue with the next party.*
>
> *The PvdA?*
> *Etc.*[2]

Respondents gave their answers using a ten-point scale, ranging from 'certainly never' to 'sometime certainly' (coded from 0 to 1 for the present analyses). These voting propensities were measured for up to eleven parties. But I can use only part of these in my analyses, as questions on the perceived issue positions were asked for a smaller number of parties.

The model to be estimated with these data can be specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha_j + \sum_k \beta_{jk} U_{ijk} + \varepsilon_{ij}, \qquad (1)$$

[2] The order in which the parties are listed is randomized.

where Y_{ij} is the voting propensity of voter i for party j, α_j is the value of the constant for party j, U_{ijk} is the spatial utility for voter i and party j on issue dimension k, β_{jk} is the impact of this spatial utility on the voting propensity for party j, and ε_{ij} is a random error term. I expect the impact of spatial utilities to depend on party characteristics, that is,

$$\beta_{jk} = \delta + \sum_z \gamma_z \cdot S_{zjk} + \theta_{jk}, \tag{2}$$

where β_{jk} is the coefficient from equation 1, δ is a constant, the S_{zjk} are z characteristics of party j with respect to issue k, the γ_z are the coefficients capturing the impact of these characteristics, and θ_{jk} is a random error term. In the models below, I will consider three types of party characteristics: issue ownership, issue extremity, and issue salience.

Spatial utilities are defined as the squared distance between parties and voters, that is,

$$U_{ijk} = \left(P_{ijk} - P_{ik}\right)^2, \tag{3}$$

where P_{ik} is the position of voter i on issue dimension k and P_{ijk} is the position of party k on that dimension, as perceived by voter i.

Probabilities of future vote and spatial utilities are available for four or five parties: the PvdA, the VVD, D66, the CDA, and Groenlinks (only in 1998). Voters' and parties' positions were measured on the following issue dimensions:

- Euthanasia: 'Euthanasia should be forbidden' vs. 'euthanasia should always be allowed to end a life upon a patient's request',
- Crime (only in 1994): 'The government should be much tougher on crime' vs. 'the government is currently acting tough enough on crime',
- Income differences: 'Differences in income should be increased' vs. 'differences in income should be decreased',
- Nuclear plants: 'Additional nuclear plants should be built' vs. 'no new nuclear plants should be built',
- Ethnic minorities: 'Foreign workers and ethnic minorities should be able to live in the Netherlands while preserving all customs of their own culture' vs. 'these people should adjust themselves fully to Dutch culture',

- European unification:[3] ‘European unification is going too fast’ vs. ‘European unification should be completed as fast as possible’,
- Asylum seekers (only in 1998): ‘Allow more asylum seekers to enter’ vs. ‘send back as many asylum seekers as possible’,
- Social benefits (only in 1998): ‘Social benefits are too low’ vs. ‘social benefits are too high’.

On all of these dimensions, respondents’ positions and their perception of party positions were measured with seven-point scales (recoded here to the 0-1 range). These variables also allow measuring the extremity of party positions, which is simply defined as the squared distance on a given dimension between a party position and the average voter position. Information on party-issue associations come from different sources. I construct two indicators on the salience of issues in parties’ campaign: one with data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al. 2001), the other with data from a content analysis of the media during the electoral campaign (Kriesi et al. 2008). With both sources of data, the salience of a given issue is expressed as the number of issue statements in the corresponding category, as a percentage of the total number of issue statements for that party. The correspondence between the six issues used in the survey data and the issue categories defined for the content analyses or the manifesto data is not perfect, unfortunately. In some cases, the issue categories of the manifesto and media data are more general than the specific issues on which positions were measured with survey data. The issue categories used for measuring salience are listed in Table 1.[4]

<Table 1 about here>

To determine the ownership of issues, finally, I turn to survey questions. In 1994, respondents were asked which parties have the best idea to solve each of a series of current problems. Four of these can be related to the positional issues mentioned before. For income differences, I rely on a question on the problem of pensioners’ income. For crime, two questions can be used: one is straightforward as it relates directly to the problem of crime; the second possible

[3] The corresponding labels in 1998 were: ‘European unification has already gone too far’ and ‘European unification should go further’.

[4] The correspondence with the categories of the manifesto data is most problematic for the issue of asylum seekers. Not only do the manifesto categories refer to a more general type of social groups, but they also refer only to positive mentions. This is especially problematic as the issue of asylum seekers is mainly articulated by right-wing populist parties, which defend more restrictive immigration rules. The estimated effect of salience does not change substantially when this potential problematic issue category is excluded, however.

indicator deals with the problem of welfare fraud. Finally, the issue of nuclear plants can be related to a question on the problem of pollution. For each of these problems, one party was mentioned much more frequently than the others as having the best ideas: the PvdA for pensioners' income, the VVD for both crime and welfare fraud, and Groenlinks for pollution.[5] I consider these parties as 'owning' the corresponding issue and measure it with a dummy variable in the regression models. Voting propensities for Groenlinks cannot however be included in 1994, as the party's issue positions were not measured.

In the 1998 election survey, voters were invited to rate the importance of five issues for six different parties. Two of these issues correspond closely to an issue dimension on which voters' and parties' positions are measured: the perceived importance of a cleaner environment can be related to the attitudes towards nuclear plants, and the importance of the problem of refugees is related to the attitudes towards asylum seekers. These data clearly show that the issue 'cleaner environment' is owned by Groenlinks.[6] The issue of refugees, on the other hand, does not appear to be owned by any party.[7]

Still in 1998, I attribute the ownership of the issue of income differences to the PvdA – similarly to the 1994 case. This issue clearly corresponds to a traditional core issue of the Social-Democrats. I also consider that the issue of social benefits is owned by the PvdA. This issue dimension was not part of the 1994 study. It is however very close to the question on solving the problem of pensioners' income, asked in 1994, for which a PvdA ownership appeared clearly. Finally, for both elections, I attribute ownership of the euthanasia issue to the CDA. This issue has been a central topic in Dutch politics for years (Andeweg and Irwin 2002). It is part of the issues dealing with Christian ethics, the ownership of which is generally attributed to the CDA (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis and Ridder 1998). Table 2 summarizes the information about the issue owners for all the issue dimensions included in the individual-level models.

<Table 2 about here>

[5] The percentages of respondents indicating these parties are: 38 per cent for the PvdA on pensioners' income, 45 per cent for the VVD on welfare fraud, 38 per cent for the VVD on crime, and 47 per cent for Groenlinks on pollution. For each of these problems, these percentages are at least twice as high as those of the second most mentioned party.

[6] The average perceived importance, on a 1-10 scale, is 8.8 for Groenlinks, while it varies from 6.6 to 7.4 for the other parties.

[7] No party stands out in the average perceived importance: 7.5 for the PvdA and Groenlinks, 7.1 for the CDA and D66, and 7.0 for the VVD.

Before turning to the empirical results, a last aspect of the estimation procedure must be discussed. The model specified in equations 1 and 2 is hierarchical. It combines individual-level and party-level variables, and it implies a cross-level interaction (the effect of party characteristics on the individual-level relationship between spatial utilities and voting propensities). I estimate this model by following a two-step strategy (Achen 2005; Jusko and Shively 2005; Lewis and Linzer 2005): First, I estimate the individual-level model separately for each party, with OLS regressions. Then, I use the coefficients from the first-stage models as the dependent variables and regress them on party characteristics. I estimate the second-stage model using weighted least squares regressions, which allow accounting for the differences across parties in the standard deviation of the step-one coefficients. The weights are computed following the method proposed by Lewis and Linzer (2005: 351f.).[8]

Variation across parties in the impact of spatial utilities

I start the analysis by examining the variation across parties in the impact of spatial utilities. To this end, I estimated the model of equation 1 separately for each party. Tables 3 and 4 present the corresponding results, for the 1994 and 1998 elections, respectively.

<Tables 3 and 4 about here>

We see that most issue dimensions have a significant and negative impact. The propensity to support a party tends to become smaller as the voter-party issue distance gets larger. Most interesting, however, is the degree to which these results vary across parties. As expected, we can observe substantial differences in the impact of the issue dimensions. In 1994, this appears very clearly for the issues of crime, nuclear plants, ethnic minorities, and European unification, which have a significant impact for some parties but not for others. Voters' preferences on ethnic minorities, for instance, do not impact on the propensity to vote for D66 or the CDA. But they influence strongly the chances of favouring the VVD. The variation in the impact of attitudes towards income differences is also striking. While this issue dimension turns out to be significant for all four parties, the size of the point estimates varies across parties by a factor of one to four. The picture is similar in 1998. Four of the seven issues (income differences, ethnic minorities, asylum seekers, social benefits) have a significant

[8] The procedure recommended by Lewis and Linzer can be estimated using the *edvreg* program for Stata, available at http://svn.cluelessresearch.com/twostep/trunk/edvreg.ado.

impact on the voting propensities for some parties, but not others. Attitudes towards euthanasia and nuclear plants matter for all voting propensities, but with substantial variation in the magnitude of the effects. Variation is only absent for the European unification issue: it does not contribute to the explanation of voting propensities, for any of the parties.

The role of party characteristics

The central question is how the variability in the impact of issue orientations can be explained. I expect it to be related to the characteristics of the party-issue pairs: issue ownership, issue salience, and extremity. To test these hypotheses, I turn to the second step in the estimation of the regression model. Tables 5 and 6 indicate the effects of parties' characteristics on the step-one coefficients.

<Tables 5 and 6 about here>

Model 1 includes all four independent variables. This model gives no support to the hypothesis that salience or extremity affects the strength of issue voting. The three corresponding indicators are clearly not significant, in 1994 as in 1998. Issue ownership, by contrast, has a significant impact in 1998, and it is very close to being significant in 1994. The p-value is just under 0.11, which may be seen as acceptable given the small number of observations. The point estimates indicate a negative effect of ownership. As the dependent variable is the effect of issue distances, this corresponds to the expected reinforcement effect of issue ownership: Voting propensities are negatively related to voter-party distance, and this negative effect is more pronounced for issues 'owned' by the corresponding party.
The small number of observations makes it more difficult to observe significant effects. This problem may further be affected by the relationships among independent variables. Ownership and extremity, for instance, are not unrelated. Parties which own a given issue are often those who take a quite radical position. For this reason, I have estimated the model again by using only one of these two indicators at a time. I have also excluded the two measures of salience, which do not to moderate issue effects at all.[9]
Extremity still displays no significant impact when the other independent variables are excluded (Model 2). The effect of issue ownership, by contrast, is stronger once the other explanatory factors are excluded, and it is statistically significant in both elections (Model 3).

[9] I also estimated the model by including only the manifesto-based measure of salience, or the media-based one. The impact of salience remains however non significant.

Looking at the point estimates, we observe that the relationship between issue distances and voting propensities is about twice as strong for issues 'owned' by the corresponding party.

Discussion

This paper analyzed the role of issue preferences in the voting decision process. I tested the hypothesis that the impact of issue distances on voting propensities should vary across parties and I suggested several party characteristics that should play a role in this process. The results obtained for the 1994 and 1998 Dutch elections clearly show that voting propensities for different parties are not influenced by the same issue dimensions. These findings strongly support the hypothesis that citizens' evaluations of parties are not explained by a single vote function. Citizens do not evaluate all parties with the same set of criteria.

In the second part of the analyses, I estimated how the strength of the relationships between issue distances and voting propensities was influenced by characteristics of parties. Following the saliency theory and the issue ownership model, I postulated that voting propensities should be more strongly determined by the issues a party is associated with – through long-standing cleavages or through campaign strategies. The results were mixed. I found no evidence for an effect of issue salience. Evaluations of parties do not depend more strongly on issues that are particularly salient in their programme, or issues on which they frequently take position during the campaign. This conclusion is strengthened by the use of two different indicators of salience, based on alternative data sources, which lead to equally negative results. The analyses presented here revealed no effect either of the extremity of party positions. This factor was expected to have an indirect effect on issue salience, with parties investigating more efforts in communicating their positions where they differ strongly from their competitors. On the other hand, the results clearly show that issue ownership matters. Parties who 'own' an issue – such as crime for the VVD or income differences for the PvdA – tend to be evaluated more strongly on the corresponding dimension. For example, the impact of attitudes towards income differences on voting propensities, relative to that of other attitudes, is stronger for the issue owner PvdA than for other parties.

Judging from these results, the determinants of voting propensities seem to be more strongly influenced by traditional associations between parties and issues than by the content of the campaign. The criteria on which voters evaluate parties are influenced by the *long-term* party-issue associations. This would imply that while the voting-decision process depends on party

characteristics, parties themselves have only limited possibilities to influence the criteria by which they are evaluated. At least in the short run.

The analyses I have presented show the importance of issue ownership for explaining voters' preferences. However, they offer a different interpretation of how ownership matters. The 'standard' theory of issue ownership postulates that parties compete by trying to prime the issue they own in voters' decision (Petrocik 1996). The party that wins in making its issue most salient should also win the election as it perceived as being more competent on the dominant issue. Thus, parties each try to prime a specific issue dimension, and the one that succeeds best determines the issue dimension on which *all* parties are evaluated. In contrast to this, I have argued and shown that ownership has party-specific effects. It is not a competition among parties about making one's owned issue most salient. Owning an issue matters, but it does so mainly for the evaluation of the owner – and less so for explaining the propensities to support one of its competitors.

Appendix

<Tables A1 and A2 about here>

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Table 1. Issue categories used to measure salience

Issue	Categories in manifesto data [a)]	Categories in media data [b)]
Euthanasia	Traditional Morality: Positive, Traditional Morality: Negative	Cultural liberalism
Crime	Law and Order	Security
Income differences	Social Justice	Economic liberalism
Nuclear plants	Environmental protection	Environmental protection
Ethnic minorities	Multiculturalism: Positive, Multiculturalism: Negative	Cultural liberalism
European unification	European Community: Positive, European Community: Negative	European integration
Asylum seekers	Underprivileged Minority Groups: Positive, Non-economic Demographic Groups: Positive	Immigration
Social benefits	Welfare State Expansion: Positive, Welfare State Limitation: Positive	Welfare

a) For a definition of these issue categories, see Budge et al. {, 2001 #1294: 222-228}.
b) For a definition of these issue categories, see Kriesi et al. {, 2006 #1816: 932f.}

Table 2. Issue owners

Issue	1994	1998
Euthanasia	CDA	CDA
Crime	VVD	-
Income differences	PvdA	PvdA
Nuclear plants	(Groenlinks)[a)]	Groenlinks
Ethnic minorities	no owner	no owner
European unification	no owner	no owner
Asylum seekers	-	no owner
Socihal benefits	-	PvdA

a) Ownership can be attributed to Groenlinks, but the voting propensities for this party cannot be modelled in 1994.

Table 3. Impact of spatial utilities on voting propensities, 1994 election. Coefficients and standard errors estimated with OLS regressions.

	PvdA	D66	CDA	VVD
Constant	0.73***	0.73***	0.62***	0.74***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Euthanasia	-0.25***	-0.29***	-0.33***	-0.21***
	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Crime	-0.10	-0.25***	0.08	-0.12
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Income differences	-0.46***	-0.18*	-0.12*	-0.37***
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Nuclear plants	-0.02	-0.32***	-0.23***	-0.17***
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Ethnic minorities	-0.15*	0.02	0.04	-0.29***
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
European unification	-0.08	-0.11	-0.13	-0.16**
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)
N	621	541	592	562
R^2	0.22	0.17	0.19	0.35

** p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001*

Table 4. Impact of spatial utilities on voting propensities, 1998 election. Coefficients and standard errors estimated with OLS regressions.

	PvdA	D66	CDA	VVD	Groenlinks
Constant	0.80***	0.66***	0.69***	0.77***	0.69***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Euthanasia	-0.38***	-0.44***	-0.40***	-0.18***	-0.25***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Income differences	-0.48***	-0.11	-0.04	-0.32***	-0.41***
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.04)	(0.06)
Nuclear plants	-0.25***	-0.18*	-0.32***	-0.22***	-0.41***
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Ethnic minorities	-0.04	-0.15*	0.02	-0.21**	-0.17**
	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)
European unification	-0.09	-0.00	0.01	0.03	-0.08
	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Asylum seekers	-0.00	-0.03	-0.25**	-0.23***	-0.08
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Social benefits	-0.21**	-0.28**	-0.18	-0.27***	-0.11
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.08)
N	971	840	841	913	699
R^2	0.19	0.19	0.23	0.32	0.29

** p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001*

Table 5. Effects of issue ownership, issue salience, and extremity, on the relationship between spatial utilities and voting propensities, 1994 election

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Ownership	-0.13	0.08			-0.15†	0.08
Salience, manifesto	0.00	0.01				
Salience, media	0.01	0.01				
Extremity	-0.48	0.50	-0.66	0.52		
Constant	-0.23**	0.07	-0.15***	0.03	-0.16***	0.03
R^2	0.28		0.07		0.14	
N	24		24		24	

*† p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001*
Note: The models are estimated with WLS.

Table 6. Effects of issue ownership, issue salience, and extremity, on the relationship between spatial utilities and voting propensities, 1998 election

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Ownership	-0.17*	0.08			-0.21**	0.07
Salience, manifesto	-0.01	0.01				
Salience, media	0.00	0.00				
Extremity	-0.45	0.56	-0.72	0.57		
Constant	-0.14*	0.06	-0.17***	0.03	-0.17***	0.02
R^2	0.24		0.05		0.22	
N	35		35		35	

*† p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001*
Note: The models are estimated with WLS.

Table A1. Descriptive statistics: individual-level variables

	1994		1998	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
Voting propensities				
PvdA	0.56	0.35	0.66	0.30
D66	0.60	0.29	0.54	0.30
CDA	0.45	0.33	0.49	0.32
VVD	0.50	0.35	0.53	0.35
Groenlinks	-	-	0.50	0.32
Squared voter-party distance				
Euthanasia	0.17	0.25	0.16	0.24
Crime	0.15	0.21	-	-
Income differences	0.17	0.23	0.14	0.20
Nuclear plants	0.20	0.25	0.13	0.18
Ethnic minorities	0.15	0.21	0.13	0.19
European unification	0.09	0.15	0.10	0.16
Asylum seekers	-	-	0.12	0.18
Social benefits	-	-	0.08	0.13

Note: All individual-level variables range from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 1. The distance variables are between voters' position and their perception *of the party position.*

Table A2. Descriptive statistics: characteristics of 'party × issue' combinations

	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.
1994				
Ownership	0.13	0.34	0.00	1.00
Salience, manifesto	3.69	2.89	0.19	10.51
Salience, media	8.67	4.49	0.00	18.60
Extremity	0.04	0.05	0.00	0.16
1998				
Ownership	0.11	0.32	0.00	1.00
Salience, manifesto	5.11	3.55	0.43	13.90
Salience, media	10.16	6.42	2.63	24.00
Extremity	0.03	0.04	0.00	0.18