

The Limits of Issue Ownership in a Polarized Era

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Accepted for publication at *American Politics Research*

Abstract: The Democratic and Republican parties have longstanding reputations for their abilities to competently handle particular issues. These reputations help to simplify voter decision-making. Voters need only to determine which issues are most important in an election, then support the party with the strongest reputation for handling those issues. As elite polarization has grown in recent decades, the parties' reputations should be even clearer, facilitating their use in vote choice. However, the corresponding partisan polarization in the electorate should limit the breadth of issue ownership beliefs, as well as the impact of these beliefs on vote choice. In this manuscript, we use a novel survey experiment to prime the parties' owned issues. Our results show that the prime causes a shift in intended vote choice among pure independents, but not among partisans. These findings suggest that polarization has not erased issue ownership, but that partisanship has narrowed its potential impact.

Partisanship is the primary shortcut that citizens use to help structure their worldviews and simplify the complex political systems in which they live. Political parties have longstanding reputations for the ideologies they advance, the character traits they possess, and the issues that they “own.” According to issue ownership theory, each party is perceived as most capable or competent at handling specific issues (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Budge 1983; Stubager 2018). In the United States, the Democratic Party is seen as better able to handle issues related to the environment, healthcare, poverty, and Social Security, while the Republican Party is seen more competent on the issues of crime, national defense, and terrorism (Egan 2013; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Petrocik 1996; Hayes 2005). These stable stereotypes about the parties’ competencies help simplify voter decision-making; voters merely need to identify the most pressing problems facing the country and choose the party that is most motivated and able to handle those problems.

Issue ownership may be particularly accessible and salient in an era where Democratic and Republican elites have so clearly polarized. As the parties have staked out more divergent positions, and the public has become more aware of these differences (Freeze and Montgomery 2016; Levendusky 2009; Hetherington 2001), the public should be more able to rely on perceptions of issue ownership when formulating their vote choice. But, as Goggin and Theodoridis (2017) note, “nearly all survey evidence of issue ownership analyzes the electorate in the aggregate, without separating respondents by their partisan identification” (p. 678). And current levels of polarization in the electorate raise questions about just how pervasive issue ownership and its effects are once individuals’ partisan loyalties are taken into consideration.

As such, we examine the effects of issue ownership on vote choice by using a novel design that experimentally manipulates the salience of owned issues. Our results suggest that while partisanship has not eliminated patterns of issue ownership, partisan identity limits the potential

effects. Specifically, we find that priming a party's owned issues only has a significant effect on the vote intentions of pure independents. Thus, while ownership is constrained, parties still stand to gain when the issues they own are made salient.

Issue Ownership in a Polarized Electorate

Despite much scholarly focus on issue ownership, we know relatively little about how it operates in a highly polarized environment. In theory, ideological polarization at the elite level could increase the role of issue ownership by making the differences between party brands more apparent. Americans are now more able to identify which parties are more liberal and more conservative (Pope and Woon 2009) and are more likely to align their issue attitudes with their parties (e.g., Freeze and Montgomery 2015). Further, the public is now more able to identify the issues that the parties consistently devote attention to (Hetherington 2001; Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2016; Peskowitz 2012; Grynaviski 2010). For example, citizens increasingly perceive Democrats as giving more attention to social welfare policies and Republicans as giving more attention to taxes and law and order (Pope and Woon 2009). Taken together, polarization has increased the clarity of where the parties stand on the issues and which issues they prioritize. As a result, issue ownership should be a more accessible consideration in the minds of voters.

However, the clarifying effects of polarization may be outweighed by partisan considerations. Affective attachments to one's own party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Mason 2018) may create feelings of in-party superiority on all issues, regardless of ownership reputations. For example, partisans perceive the economy to be better and the world more peaceful when the president shares their partisan affiliation (Bartels 2002; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twigg 1997; Conover, Feldman, and Knight 1987; Schaffner and Roche 2017; Jones 2019). Strong partisans are also motivated to defend their party against negative coverage and to counter disagreeable information about their party (Zaller 1992; Taber and Lodge 2006; Slothuus

and de Vreese 2010; Jones 2019; Bisgaard 2019). As a result, partisan identity may undermine shared beliefs about the parties' competencies. However, there is evidence that policy preferences and performance evaluations also influence perceptions of issue ownership, even after accounting for respondent partisanship, particularly among those who feel some out-party ambivalence (Craig and Cossette 2020).

Even if partisans admit the strengths of the opposing party, there seems to be little room left for these beliefs to affect vote choice, as partisan defection is becoming increasingly rare (Jacobson 2013; Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Weisberg and Devine 2010). Partisanship can prevail even amid scandals or accusations of poor behavior. For example, in the 2016 presidential election, 80% of Evangelical Republicans still voted for Donald Trump after the release of the lewd Access Hollywood tape (Cassese 2019). Whether driven by identity or aligned ideological and policy views (Fowler 2020), strong partisan identities might minimize any potential influence of beliefs about issue ownership on vote choice.

Altogether, we expect that beliefs about issue ownership persist in an increasingly clear and polarized environment. However, we expect some combination of partisan motivated reasoning and increased partisan sorting on values, ideologies, and issue stances to create large partisan differences in these beliefs and limit their effects on vote choice. Of course, not all citizens have strong ties to one of the two major parties. Among those who lack a clear partisan identity – i.e., independents – issue ownership should be an accessible heuristic. That is, independents should be free of the psychological attachments that may color reception of the increasingly clear issue signals sent by the parties. Subsequently, issue ownership is more likely to have a causal effect on vote choice among pure independents than on partisans.

Experimental Design

To examine the effects of issue ownership, we conducted an experiment designed to increase the salience of either Republican-owned or Democrat-owned issues through exposure to news headlines. Our use of headlines is intended to simulate the important role that media plays in setting the agenda, shaping opinions of issue importance, and swaying perceptions of parties and leaders (Iyengar et al. 1984). While media attention is partly determined by exogenous events that require coverage (e.g. natural disasters, war; (Merolla and Zechmeister 2013), news coverage is also shaped by strategic campaigning (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004) and choices by the media. For example, partisan outlets devote more attention to their party's owned issues and more balanced sources still tend to give more favorable coverage to a party when focusing on its owned issues (Hayes 2008). Thus, even if patterns of issue ownership are fixed, the benefits from that ownership will depend on which topics are most prominent in the media. Increased issue salience should work by increasing the effects of prior beliefs, leading to the largest effects among those who hold standard beliefs about issue ownership.

The study was embedded in a survey fielded on Sept. 19, 2019 on the Lucid platform (N = 1,009), which aggregates respondents from many online panels and provides demographically diverse samples. Recent research shows that findings from Lucid samples closely resemble experimental findings from nationally representative samples (Coppock and McClellan 2019).¹

Figure 1 shows an example of our treatments. To manipulate issue salience, all respondents were shown a set of three questions, each asking which of three headlines they would be most likely to read.² Each headline included a brief summary of the article and a corresponding image. Two of the three headlines in each question were about political topics, while the third was about entertainment, food, or science. Respondents were randomly assigned to a Democrat or Republican-owned issue condition.³ In each condition, all political headlines highlighted issues owned by that party. In the Republican-owned condition, topics included national security, terrorism, and crime

(e.g. “Violent Crime is Rising in U.S. and Victims Aren’t Reporting it.”). In the Democrat-owned condition, topics included the environment, health care, Social Security, and education (e.g. “Extreme Climate Change in the United States: Here are America’s fastest-warming places”).⁴ In total, respondents viewed six headlines highlighting either Democrat or Republican-owned issues. Note that respondents did not actually read the articles, they simply indicated which they would most like to read, which served as a cover story to encourage respondents to engage with the experimental stimuli.

<<< Figure 1 about here >>>

Our dependent variable is a measure of partisan vote choice. Because our survey was in the field during the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, we asked respondents about their preferences between Republican President Donald Trump and four potential Democratic candidates: Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren. We combine responses to these four questions with respondents’ expressed preference for the Democratic or Republican candidate for U.S. Congress in their own district to create an index of partisan vote choice ($\alpha = .97$), where higher values indicate greater support for Republicans. We opt for this multiple-measure approach to get a more reliable measure of partisan attitudes that is less influenced by the idiosyncrasies of particular candidates, but as models in the Appendix Table A5 show, focusing just on the generic House preference or the Trump vs. Biden matchup yields the same substantive results.

We also measured perceptions of issue ownership prior to the experiment. Respondents separately rated how well each party would handle six issues, each on a five-point scale ranging from “terrible” to “great.” Three issues are historically Democrat-owned (poverty, environment, health care), while three are historically Republican-owned (national security, crime, terrorism). To create a measure of relative perceptions of ownership, we subtracted scores for the Democratic Party from scores for the Republican Party for each issue, then averaged each set of three issues.

Results

We begin with Table 1, which offers an overview of ownership perceptions based on the survey questions prior to the experiment. The full sample means generally follow expected patterns of ownership – Democrats are advantaged on the environment, poverty, and healthcare, while Republicans are advantaged on national security and terrorism. The exception is on the issue of crime, where respondents see essentially no difference ($p=.854$) between the two parties. When we differentiate by the partisanship of respondents, we see that the mean perceptions of independents are similar to those of the full sample, but that the means for partisans suggest a good deal of bias. While both Democrats and Republicans view their own parties as better at handling all six issues, partisans give their party a significantly smaller advantage on the out-party's owned issues. Thus, these initial results support the idea that even though partisanship clearly influences perceptions, issue ownership is still evident.

<<< Table 1 about here >>>

Next, we look at how our issue primes affected vote choice. We start by predicting the vote choice index as a function of treatment assignment among the full sample. The Republican issue prime (relative to the Democratic prime) causes a small shift in support for Republican candidates, but this effect is not statistically significant ($b = .03, p = .273$). We also estimated a similar model that includes controls for pretreatment partisanship, ideology, perceptions of issue ownership, and demographics. As shown in Figure 2, the issue prime is again in the expected direction but falls short of statistical significance ($b = .02, p = .102$). Thus, our results suggest the possibility of small average effects among the full sample, but the estimates are uncertain.

<<< Figure 2 about here >>>

However, we expected the strongest results among pure independents ($n = 161$). Among this subsample, the prime has a significant effect in the base model ($b = .09, p = .027$), as well as when

controls are included ($b = .09, p = .023$). The effect among partisans, on the other hand, is small and not significant ($b = .01, p = .575$), and is significantly smaller than the effect among independents ($p = .023$). Thus, the issue ownership prime seems to work as expected, but only among pure independents.⁵

We also expected that the issue prime would be moderated by perceptions of how well the parties handle each set of issues. Specifically, the Republican (Democratic) issue prime should have the largest effect among respondents who view Republicans (Democrats) as better handling these issues. To test these expectations, we account for respondents' perceptions of issue ownership as measured prior to exposure to any treatments. Focusing on the subsample of pure independents, we interact the treatment with perceptions of handling of Democratic issues and perceptions of handling of Republican issues (see Table A4 in Appendix for full model results). As expected, among independents who viewed the Democrats as slightly better able to handle their owned issues (scoring -1 on the scale; approximately the 23rd percentile), the Democratic treatment (relative to the Republican treatment) shifted support toward Democrats ($b = .12, p = .011$). But among independents who did *not* view Democrats as more capable on their owned issues, the effect was smaller and not statistically significant ($b = .05, p = .197$),⁶ and the interaction term was marginally significant ($p = .098$). Similarly, among independents who viewed the Republicans as slightly better able to handle their owned issues (scoring 1 on the scale; approximately the 90th percentile), the Republican treatment caused them to shift their votes toward Republicans ($b = .16, p = .003$). But among independents who did *not* view Republicans as more able to handle their owned issues, the Republican treatment had no discernible effect ($b = .05, p = .197$), and the interaction term was statistically significant ($p = .019$).

Limitations

Of course, our study has limitations, particularly regarding the mechanism through which our prime affected independents. One concern is that the primes actually highlighted performance differences between the parties. However, the headlines were designed to prime a policy threat (e.g., increasing crime) without mentioning a cause or solution. Another concern is that, because issue stances tend to be correlated with issue ownership perceptions, the priming effects may have been driven by issue attitudes, rather than ownership perceptions. A more complex design would be required to tease apart these explanations and test the original claims of issue ownership theory. However, a look at the simple correlations between issue ownership perceptions and ideology among independents suggest that our findings are not just reflecting preferences. All correlations are weak ($r < .19$) and two of the six (terrorism and national security) are negative. While the 7-point ideological scale is an imperfect proxy for issue positions, many of individuals' most salient issue opinions do map onto a single ideological dimension quite well (Abramowitz 2011; Hare, Highton, and Jones 2021). And regardless of the particular mechanism, our results still imply that the parties maintain historical advantages on a set of owned issues and that media salience of those issues may bring advantages among non-partisan voters.

Conclusion

According to the original conception of issue ownership, party reputations stand as the “critical constants” in elections. As a result, political messaging can increase the salience of particular problems, and thus “cause voters to use their party linked perception of the issue handling ability of the candidates to choose between (or among) them” (Petrcik 1996, 826-827). But in an era of salient partisan identities and heightened affective polarization, it is easy to imagine that the parties' reputations have been entirely obscured by partisanship, erasing the effects of issue competencies on electoral outcomes. Indeed, although aggregate patterns of issue ownership persist, partisans tend to see their own party as more competent on most issues (Goggin & Theodoridis 2017).

While much existing research on issue ownership has been observational, we contribute to this topic by experimentally manipulating the salience of partisan-owned issues. Our results suggest only a modest impact of increasing the salience of owned issues. However, subgroup analyses reveal a significant effect among pure independents and a null effect among partisans. Additionally, our results show that the effects of issue salience were larger among independents who already perceived the parties as more competent on their owned issues. These findings suggest that the impact of issue ownership is quite narrow. To this end, it is unlikely that the effects will be politically significant in every election cycle and that these effects might be often muted. But nonetheless, even a small group of more persuadable voters can play a pivotal role in certain close elections.

Our work also highlights how context and the media may play crucial roles in shaping the outcomes of elections. While parties and candidates can try to control the message, they ultimately have little say over the headlines that are written and sound bites that are most often replayed. So by deciding which issues deserve the most attention, those working in the media may also be pushing independent voters toward one party versus the other. Although, given the media environment today, this may come in the form of competing cues through which voters have to decide which messaging to make most salient or influential. Thus, the question becomes one of what parties and their candidates can do when they are seemingly on the losing side of the most salient issue of the election. Expanding on works exploring the links between campaign messages and perceptions of ownership (Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave 2015) can offer insights as to whether and how parties can create a more favorable narrative to potentially broaden their appeal beyond just the party faithful.

¹ See the Appendix Table A1 for sample demographics.

² We do not analyze the questions about article preference. These questions were only included as a cover story for our experimental manipulation.

³ For the sake of statistical power, we did not include a pure control condition.

⁴ See the Appendix for full treatments.

⁵ As shown in Appendix Table A3, these findings are not driven by lower levels of education among independents and also hold when excluding inattentive respondents.

⁶ We estimate this effect among respondents who view the two parties equally, on average, which is very close to the mean among this subsample.

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Table 1: Perceptions of Issue Ownership by Respondent Partisanship

	Full Sample N=1009	Democrats N=480	Independents N=161	Republicans N=368
Democrat-Owned Issues				
The Environment	-.684 (1.953)	-1.814 (1.569)	-.342 (1.205)	.633 (1.779)
Healthcare	-.475 (2.103)	-1.831 (1.641)	-.329 (1.177)	1.226 (1.649)
Poverty	-.463 (1.953)	-1.670 (1.530)	-.267 (1.208)	1.022 (1.629)
Average of Democrat-Owned	-.541 (1.874)	-1.774 (1.444)	-.313 (1.039)	.960 (1.478)
Republican-Owned Issues				
Crime	-.009 (1.870)	-1.123 (1.469)	-.056 (1.097)	1.459 (1.571)
National Security	.192 (2.020)	-1.075 (1.583)	.248 (1.096)	1.818 (1.631)
Terrorism	.207 (1.997)	-1.033 (1.579)	.169 (1.123)	1.837 (1.571)
Average of Republican-Owned	.130 (1.858)	-1.079 (1.400)	.119 (.913)	1.705 (1.467)
Difference between Democrat- and Republican-Owned Issues	-.672*** (.038)	-.697*** (.054)	-.433*** (.087)	-.745*** (.065)


Entries are group means. Standard deviations are in parentheses, except for bottom row, which shows standard errors. Each party was rated on a 5-point scale on each issue. The Democratic score was subtracted from the Republican score so that positive values indicate a Republican advantage and negative values indicate a Democratic advantage. Independent leaners are scored as partisans.

Figure 1: Example of the Experimental Treatments


Which article would you be most likely to read?

- Al-Qaeda's Continuing Challenge to the United States**


Reports contend that al-Qaeda remains resilient and that the group continues to pose a major terrorism threat.


- Violent Crime is Rising in U.S. and Victims Aren't Reporting it**

The rate of violent crime in the U.S. rose for a third straight year in 2018, driven partly by an increase in rape and sexual assault incidents that...


- Asteroid as Powerful as 10 Billion WWII Bombs May Have Wiped out the Dinosaurs**

Rocks from deep inside the Chicxulub crater show what happened in the minutes to hours after...



An example of a Republican-owned treatment. See the Appendix for the full set of treatments.

Figure 2: Change in Support for Republican Candidates with Republican Issue Prime

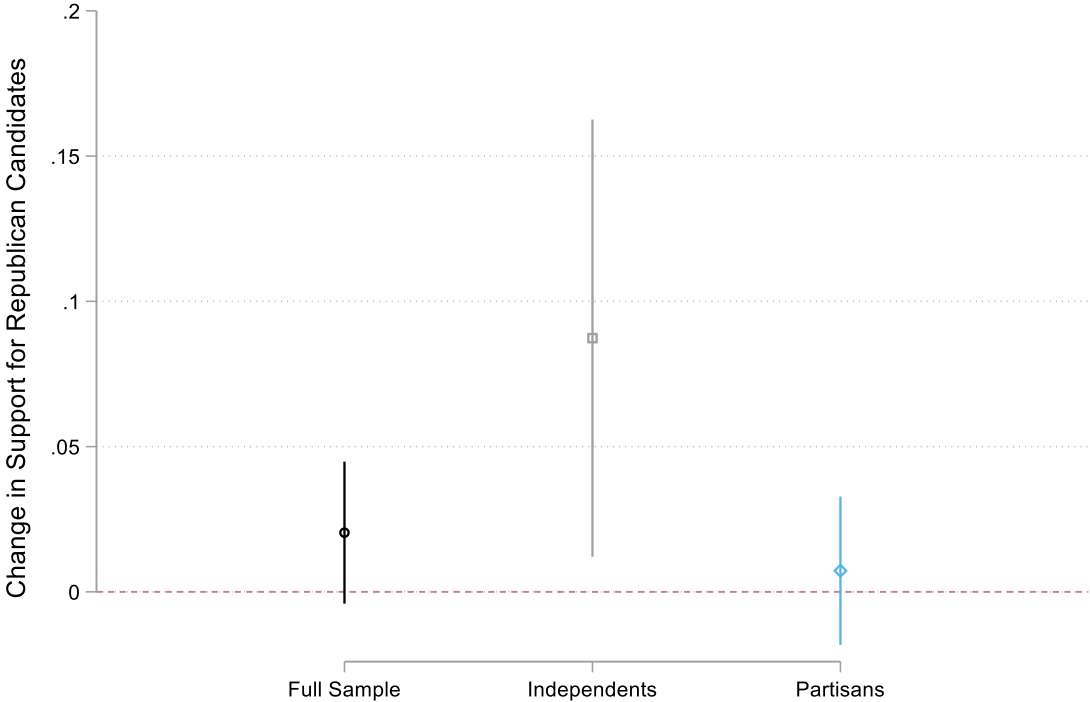


Figure plots the coefficient estimates (and 95% confidence intervals) from the full model in Table A3 in the Appendix.