**How political parties’ issue ownerships reduce to spatial proximity**

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**Abstract**. Scholarly interest in issue ownership is growing rapidly. Although originally introduced as a competence-oriented, alternative concept to the predominantly spatial understanding of voting and party behaviour, parties’ policy positions are an inescapable aspect of issue ownership. Using data for multiple issues in several countries over time, this paper shows that the party with issue ownership sides with the median voter. A party earns issue ownership by taking up a position as close to as many voters as possible. Moreover, the analysis indicates that a party’s issue emphasis only matters to issue ownership insofar as it is used as a device to make its position credible to voters. Hence, to have issue ownership is to have a credible position, and in that sense, issue ownership has less added theoretical value to spatial proximity than previous literature suggests.

**Key words**: Issue ownership; political parties; policy position; median voter.

Political parties’ issue ownership is a central ingredient not only in elections (Meguid and Belanger 2008; Petrocik 1996), but also for party competition and legislation (Seeberg 2013). This has spurred an accelerating interest in the concept of issue ownership (Jennings and Green 2017; Lefevere *et al.* 2015).

I make two contributions to this literature: (1) I analyse the importance of a party’s position to issue ownership. Although issue ownership is often presented in contrast with policy representation (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave *et al.* 2015: 790–1), I argue that a party’s position is an inescapable part of issue ownership. To take an example, conservative parties in Western democracies tend to own the crime issue not only because they have put more emphasis on it than other parties and experienced declining crime rates while in office (i.e. party performance), but also because they – in line with the preference in the electorate – persistently spend more on the police and prisons and adopt tougher sentencing instead of advocating for social policy and prevention, as social democratic parties typically do (i.e. party position; Seeberg 2013). Hence, they are competent not only because they ‘do something’, but because they ‘do the right thing’ and adopt the policy which a majority of voters want. In this way, party position is key to issue ownership. This point has been made previously by Therriault (2015) and Stubager and Slothuus (2013; see also Wagner and Zeglovits 2014), who show thata voter tends to consider a party more competent if her position is closer to the party’s position. Yet the question remains whether this translates to the party level: can a party without issue ownership move closer to the position of the median voter, i.e. where the majority of voters are located in spatial terms, and improve on its issue ownership score? I show that parties that are located close to the median voter position on an issue are more likely to have issue ownership. In fact, this policy proximity is more important to issue ownership than a party’s issue emphasis – the source on which the literature has focused.

(2) I analyse the multiplicative influence on issue ownership of a party’s issue emphasis and its position. I show that a party’s issue emphasis only matters to issue ownership in connection to its position: if a party puts emphasis on the issue, the boost its issue ownership receives if it moves closer to the median voter increases. The argument is that such emphasis adds credibility to its position change. Despite much research on the sources of issue ownership, such an interactive approach to issue ownership is rare in the literature (see, e.g., Slothuus and Stubager 2013; Egan 2013; an exception is Van der Brug 2004).

To make these contributions, I analyse novel data across multiple countries and issues over several decades on political parties’ positions, issue emphasis, and issue ownership as well as the median voter.

By showing how issue ownership essentially reduces to a party’s position vis-à-vis the median voter, this paper ultimately begs the question of whether we need a distinct concept of issue ownership apart from the broader and more rooted concept of spatial policy representation. The answer in this paper is that the theoretical benefit of issue ownership is limited because the party with issue ownership sides with the median voter. The analysis indicates that issue ownership refers to a party’s ability to deliver on its position; that is, the credibility of its position on the issue. A party builds this credibility by emphasizing its position. Hence, credibly taking the right position, i.e. the position of the median voter, is vital to earning issue ownership. Thus, issue ownership adds much less theoretical value to spatial policy representation than previous literature suggests.

A greater appreciation of how parties’ positions connect to issue ownership is important because it helps to provide an answer to important puzzles in the literature. For instance, how did Social Democrats in Western democracies win issue ownership on crime in the 1990s (Holian 2004; Norris 1997) and Conservatives issue ownership on welfare (Arndt 2014; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004)? This is a puzzle because these parties were in opposition and therefore unable to build a track record, which is a main source of issue ownership according to existing literature (Lefevere *et al.* 2015). I argue and provide supportive evidence that their success stems from remarkable shifts in their stances on crime and welfare, respectively.

**The underestimated importance of political parties’ positions to issue ownership**

Issue ownership was popularized by Petrocik (1996) as an alternative to the position-oriented, dominant Downsian account of the mass‒elite linkage (Downs 1957). According to Petrocik (1996: 829‒30), ‘[t]he median voter [… is] inclined to view elections as choices about […] resolving problems, and not about the specifics of the resolution’. Hence, voters are more concerned with the ability of a party to handle problems on an issue (i.e., issue ownership[[1]](#endnote-1)) than its policy position (i.e., policy representation). To understand political parties’ issue ownerships, the blossoming literature on why a party has issue ownership has therefore focused on parties’ issue emphasis (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Walgrave et al. 2009) and performance (Brasher 2009; Jennings and Green 2017), as opposed to their positions. Issue ownership is all about ‘partisan priorities’, according to one of the most ambitious studies on the topic (Egan 2013), and scholars tend to equate issue ownership with issue saliency and set up an opposition between issue ownership and position (van der Brug 2004; Banda 2016). Recent research has even tried to revise the measure of issue ownership to avoid any conflation with position (Stubager 2018).

Yet, as Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch (2015: 790–1) conclude in their comprehensive review of issue ownership research, party position is an underestimated source of issue ownership in comparison to a party’s issue emphasis and performance on an issue. Hence, to make progress on the understanding of issue ownership, the next step is to focus on parties’ positions. Micro-level studies of voters already show that a voter tends to consider a party more competent if her position is closer to the party’s position (Therriault 2015; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014), that the influence of issue ownership on vote choice mainly operates through ideology (van der Brug 2004), and that issue ownership communicates information to the voter about a party’s position (Banda 2016). The question, however, still remains whether this translates to the party level: To what extent can a party improve on its issue ownership score by moving closer to the position of the median voter, i.e. where the majority of voters are located in spatial terms? Understanding how a voter evaluates a party’s competence (as in existing literature) is not the same as providing an answer to how parties actually go about establishing issue ownership by taking positions. I take up this focus on the macro level and aim to provide an answer.

**Why a political party’s policy position is vital to issue ownership**

The starting point to theorize on how political parties’ policy positions influence issue ownership is the initial conceptualization of issue ownership. Even though Petrocik introduced issue ownership as an alternative concept to the Downsian understanding of party and voting behaviour (Downs 1957), parties’ policy positions were an early, foundational aspect of issue ownership. As Budge and Farlie (1983: 287) write, a party has issue ownership when voters perceive it to be ‘much more dependable in carrying out the desired objective than others’. Hence, issue ownership is not only about a party’s emphasis of an issue and its performance on the issue – the party is ‘dependable in carrying out’ – but also about actually delivering on the ‘desired objectives’ – the objectives that voters want.

When Petrocik (1996) later popularized the issue ownership concept, he introduced issue ownership as an alternative to spatial analysis. Nevertheless, party position features prominently in his conceptualization of issue ownership. According to Petrocik, issue ownership is a product of a party’s short-term performance on an issue and its much more long-term links to constituencies on the issue. As Petrocik (1996: 827) explains regarding the latter, ‘party constituency issue ownership 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’. However, if issue ownership emanates from the societal cleavages and political conflict on which today’s party system and conflict structure build (Mair *et al.* 2004), parties earn issue ownership by representing opposing constituencies and taking diverging positions on issues.

For example, Social Democratic parties formed to represent the interests of the low-skilled and low-paid, and the fight for social rights has remained central to these parties (Hibbs 1977). As much of the electorate – beyond just the low-skilled core constituency – appreciate such social rights, social democratic parties can be said to side with the median voter on this specific issue and have issue ownership on welfare. Since the social democratic welfare position and welfare issue ownership emanate from the birth of the party system and have not changed much since (Budge 1994; Finseraas and Vernby 2011), this appears to be a long-term relationship.

Yet the development of the welfare issue also shows how position matters in the shorter term. Recent shifts in parties’ positions on welfare demonstrate their importance to issue ownership. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many liberal and conservative parties across Western Europe shifted markedly to the left on the welfare state, supporting guaranteed health and education to the middle class as well as generous eldercare. It was a major break with their previous, rather hostile approach to the welfare state, and they made great inroads into social democrats’ previously safe issue ownership on welfare (Arndt 2014; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004). It was not only right-wing parties that had such success – social democrats made similar inroads to right-wing issue ownership on crime in the 1990s (Holian 2004; Norris 1997), and more recently (at least in Denmark), on immigration (Bale *et al.* 2010).

Following a simple Downsian logic (Downs 1957), I argue that a party needs to move to the popular – or median voter – position in order to earn (or overtake) issue ownership. Because voters rate proximate parties’ competence more highly (Therriault 2015; Stubager and Slothuus 2013), a party should position itself as close to as many voters as possible. A party cannot be proximate to every voter across the political spectrum on an issue, but it can be closer to more voters than any other party and thereby occupy the popular position.This is the basic mechanism behind the influence of parties’ policy positions on issue ownership. This mechanism squares with much research on parties’ issue competition, which stresses that a party should emphasize issues on which it has issue ownership exactly because it is in those areas that it sides with a majority of the voters (De Sio and Weber 2014: 873).

The Downsian-based mechanism implies that voters who are more distant from the median voter position should be less inclined to support the party at the median voter position (see Slothuus and Stubager [2013] and Therriault [2015] for supportive evidence). Moreover, a party that is *not* located close to the median voter will be seen as the issue owner by the minority of voters who are proximate to this party’s position (this party does not have issue ownership overall, however).

The Downsian-based mechanism does not imply that a party can just moderate and move to the centre to earn issue ownership. Rather, the party should move to the position of the median voter, which is often, but far from always, at the centre. On new issues such as the environment and immigration, for instance, green and radical right parties built issue ownership by taking rather extreme positions (Wagner 2012). According to a Downsian-based argument this is because the median voter wanted environmental protection at the expense of economic growth on the one hand and fewer immigrants on the other (not status quo), i.e. the median voter was located on the fringes of the continuums on these issues. Green parties and radical right parties won issue ownership by taking the rather extreme positions of the median voter.

This mechanism could be more top-down than bottom-up in the sense that the party with issue ownership has extraordinary credibility which can help it turn its position into the popular position among the electorate. However, whereas such framing certainly takes place at the individual level, the message from public opinion research is that the opinion of the electorate as such, i.e. at the aggregate level, is rather stable (Page and Shapiro 1982; Converse 2006: 44–5). Hence, the bottom-up mechanism seems more relevant where parties have to move towards the position where the largest groups of voters are located. Based on this discussion, the first hypothesis is:

*H1: Issue ownership increases when the distance between a party’s position and the median voter on that issue decreases.*

This Downsian-based argument also implies that the voter distribution matters to how party proximity to the median voter influences issue ownership. On some issues – often referred to as valence issues (Stokes 1963) – voters largely agree on the end goals, such as to avoid crime or air pollution, and a distribution of voter preferences will therefore be close to unimodal. On other issues – often referred to as position issues (Stokes 1963) – voters greatly disagree on the end goals, such as on redistribution, and a distribution of voter preferences will therefore be closer to bimodal (Lelkes 2016). This matters to the argument that I make because party proximity to the median voter only brings the party closer to many voters on valence issues. On positional issues, most of the voters will be at two opposite clusters at some distance from the median voter. This means that the spatial logic of issue ownership probably matters more on valence issues – even though valence issues are defined as non-positional – and issue ownership studies therefore cannot escape positions by only selecting valence issues, such as Egan (2013) does. On the contrary, positions permeate issue ownership particularly on valence issues because here a party never earns issue ownership unless it (credibly) represents the popular position, the shared goal. This motivates the second hypothesis:

*H2: The influence of party proximity to the median voter on issue ownership decreases the more bimodal the voter distribution.*

As existing literature establishes party issue emphasis as a primary source of issue ownership (Egan 2013; Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans 2009), one way to elaborate on the importance of party positions to issue ownership is to juxtapose party position and party issue emphasis in relation to issue ownership. I will argue that party issue emphasis only matters to issue ownership in connection to the position the party promotes; party issue emphasis is a device to make its position credible to the voters.

The mechanism is rather simple. When a party emphasizes an issue – especially in an exchange with rival parties – it is hard for it not to touch on its stance on the issue. Moreover, by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue, a party communicates its position on the issue to the voters (Meyer and Wagner 2017). Hence, by persistently emphasizing an issue, a party repeats its position and shows that its position is important to the party and therefore sincere. This makes its position more credible to the voters. Such credibility is important according to a recent study by Fernandez-Vazquez (2019), who shows that the credibility of a party’s position matters to how much voters believe in the party’s position. The implication is that issue ownership does not simply boil down to a party’s policy position. A party cannot just take the popular position among voters and earn issue ownership (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019). Instead, it is the sincerity of the party’s position that feeds its reputation, as entailed in its issue ownership. A party builds this sincerity by emphasizing the issue and building a record of performance on the issue where it acts on its position.

To take the example of welfare again, the Danish Liberals only started to hit the Social Democrats’ issue ownership on welfare when they acted on their position and vocally called for better eldercare, shorter waiting lists at hospitals, and more maternity leave (Arndt 2014; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen 2004). Hence, issue ownership changed the most when the Liberals increased their emphasis of the issue and introduced legislation based on their changed, more popular position. This focus on how emphasis adds credibility to a position does not take away the fact that a position change in itself can be perceived to be more or less credible regardless of how much it is emphasized (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019). Yet credibility in a position change does not rule out credibility through emphasis. In sum, this generates the third hypothesis:

*H3: A party’s issue emphasis increases the influence of its proximity to the median voter on issue ownership.*

From this hypothesis, it follows that party position is more fundamental to issue ownership than issue emphasis because issue emphasis primarily works in connection with position.

**Data and method**

While studies of issue ownership typically rest on only one country or a small number of issues (e.g., Egan 2013; Walgrave *et al.* 2009), this study tests its hypotheses on parties in multiple countries across several issues over time. This widens the opportunities to generalize the results. The analysis covers seven issues including immigration, crime, the EU, the economy, the environment, education, and welfare for parties in 12 Western countries[[2]](#endnote-2) in national elections since the early 1990s. This produces 773 observations in total (see Table A1 in the appendix). A key advantage of this analytical setup is that it covers both old issues such as crime and the economy as well as new issues such as the environment and immigration that only emerged in Western party systems from the 1990s onwards (Green-Pedersen and Wolfe 2009; Meguid 2008). Yet they are general issues as opposed to specific events such as the euro-banking crisis, and even if such fine-grained issues often are absorbed into the more general issues of, e.g., the economy or business regulation, the analysis does not cover such issues (De Bruycker and Walgrave 2014).

To get information for parties across a large number of issues and countries over time, the analysis focuses on the electoral arena and uses aggregate data on each party’s issue ownership score and the median voter position from national election studies. In accordance with common standards in the literature (see e.g., Greene and Jensen 2018; Meyer and Wagner 2017), the analysis uses data on party position and party issue emphasis from parties’ election manifestos through the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP; Volkens *et al.* 2014). This sheds light on what a party can actually do rather than – as in previous research – whether a voter considers a party more competent when her position is closer to that party’s position (Therriault 2015; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014).

The issue ownership score for each party in each country on each issue is the proportion of respondents that picks exactly this party when asked in a national election study which party each of the respondents prefer to handle a given issue. A score is only included if it comes from a question in the survey on an issue with at least 50 respondents. The measure uses a 0‒100 scale, where a party scores 100 if everyone prefers it on the issue. The average issue ownership across issues, countries, and parties is 25.8 (st.d. 23.4). To allow comparison across countries, question items on issue ownership in the national surveys have been content-coded into issue categories,[[3]](#endnote-3) i.e., questions on health into one category etc.[[4]](#endnote-4) (for further details on this data, see Section II in the appendix and Seeberg 2017*b*).

The data on each party’s position comes from the CMP, which codes party manifestos. The CMP data are widely used in party research because they cover a large number of issues and countries over a long period of time (Adams *et al.* 2006, 2011). The CMP data are attractive for the current analysis for this reason and because they provide an objective source for locating party positions (not based on expert perceptions) exogenous to the issue ownership measure. To identify positions, I follow the convention in the literature (see, e.g., Greene and Jensen 2018) and use the scaling method suggested by Lowe *et al.* (2011), which builds on the Kim and Fording (2002) approach. In the CMP project, party manifestos are content-coded at the quasi-sentence level into issue categories. Moreover, for many issues, the coding divides positive and negative views on given issues. Such a separation of pro and con positions on an issue allows me to identify the location of each party’s position on a given issue. Following this procedure, a party’s position on, for example, the issue of education is the emphasis on education limitation minus the emphasis on education expansion.[[5]](#endnote-5) The measure is rescaled, zero being most leftist and one most rightist (details in Section III in the appendix).

In order to analyse the influence of position on issue ownership, the analysis includes the median voter. I extract information about the median voter’s position on each of the issues from national election studies. The median voter is measured as the median score among all respondents for each issue from a question about where respondents place themselves on a continuum in terms of their preferences on the issue (see Section IV in the appendix for further detail). For each issue, the median voter position takes a value from zero to one (most right-wing). As both the party position and median voter position take the value 1 (0) for the most right-wing (left-wing) stance, the distance between a party and the median voter on an issue is simply measured by subtracting the two positions and expressing the distance as a numeric value. To test the effect of proximity to the median voter, the variable is reversed so that one is the shortest distance and zero the largest.

Voters’ level of agreement about the end goals on an issue differs, as discussed in Hypothesis 2, and this might affect the extent to which position matters to issue ownership. Hence, the analysis includes the distribution of the voters using the measure of bimodality of voter distribution[[6]](#endnote-6) developed by Lelkes (2016). This measure varies from complete unimodality (0) to complete bimodality (1), where a distribution score above .56 is considered bimodal. The mean bimodality score of voter distribution for the issues in the analysis is .26 (st.d. is .09), with a minimum of .17 and a maximum of .76 (see Figure A1 in the appendix). With values above, close to, and far below .56, the analysis covers issues with an approximate unimodal distribution (i.e., valence issues) and issues with an approximate bimodal distribution (i.e., positional issues), most issues being somewhere in between. This widens the opportunities to generalize the results across issues.

To test whether party position is more important than party emphasis, and inspired by recent work by Greene and Jensen (2018), I draw on the measures in the CMP data of a party’s emphasis of each of the issues. The measure varies from zero to one (most emphasis) (details in Section III in the appendix). The analysis of party emphasis includes a control for voters’ concern with an issue (0‒1, most important issue for all voters). The data on voters’ issue concerns come from the national election studies and are an aggregate of the commonly used most important problem question.

One concern with the analysis is that it relies on data on a party’s issue emphasis and its position from the same data source (Dolezal *et al.* 2013; Greene and Jensen 2018; Meyer and Wagner 2017).[[7]](#endnote-7) For this reason, Table A5 in the appendix reports analyses based on an alternative measure of party position from the national election studies. Instead of a party position estimate from the manifesto, a party’s position is estimated using the median position of the voters who vote for that party. Since this alternative measure of party position uses the data from which the median voter is extracted, it covers the same countries and issues. For that same reason – that it shares its source with the dependent variable – this does not provide as strong a test of the argument as an analysis using the more exogenous party manifestos to tap party position, and therefore the party manifesto analysis has higher priority.

For the party-level data on issue ownership, position, and emphasis, party families from the CMP project structure the data. This categorization separates the group of communist parties from the group of green parties etc., and if more than one party exists in one of these categories at any point in time in a country, only the party with the largest vote share is included in the analysis.

In some instances, there is a gap in the data between an issue ownership observation and a position observation for a party or the median voter. This is typically because the issue ownership data is more up-to-date than the position data. In such instances, I use the most recent position observation to match the issue ownership observation. This matching covers 25% of the data for party positions and 22% for median voter position. The results do not change substantively when excluding these observations.

The variables enter the statistical models as levels without any lags. This is to avoid losing observations from the dataset with relatively few time points per party-issue-country, the unit of analysis (see Table A1 in the appendix). However, dynamic analysis with lagged independent change variables and a lagged dependent variable (see Table 2) does not change the conclusions. Following standards in the literature (see e.g., Adams *et al.* 2006; Seeberg 2017*a*), the analysis uses a fixed effects estimation with robust standard errors and panels consisting of parties on issues in countries.

**Empirical analysis**

The analysis first looks at party position and issue ownership (H1), then at how the influence of party proximity on issue ownership depends on the voter distribution (H2), and finally on how issue emphasis increases the influence of party position on issue ownership (H3).

As first-hand evidence of the data on positions, the black squares in Figure 1 display the average position of the median voter for each issue across time and country. The short horizontal lines indicate the spread by plotting the 95 per cent confidence intervals of the univariate regression to estimate the average position across countries and over time. Figure 2 plots the position and issue ownership score (averaged over time) of each left-wing party (black circles) and right-wing party (grey diamonds) across countries for each issue.[[8]](#endnote-8)

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

On several issues, a relationship between positions and issue ownership immediately emerges in Figure 2. On the issues of crime and immigration, where according to Figure 1 the median voter is located to the right, mostly grey diamonds, i.e., right-wing parties, are to the right in Figure 2 and are furthest up the y-axis, indicating the highest issue ownership scores (in line with Petrocik 1996; Seeberg 2017*b*). Hence, right-wing parties appear to have issue ownership because they advocate tough crime and immigration policies, which the median voter prefers.

A similar pattern emerges on the issues of welfare, education, and the environment, but now the black circles to the left (i.e., left-wing parties) are furthest up the y-axis in Figure 2. The median voter is to the left in Figure 1 and therefore prefers the policies promoted by left-wing parties on these issues in Figure 2. This means that the left-wing parties have issue ownership.

On the economy, the median voter is at the very centre in Figure 1 and does not unequivocally prefer more or less state intervention in the economy. Correspondingly, the parties with the highest issue ownership scores are at the centre of the spectrum in Figure 2, and we see a largely reversed u-shaped curve between party positions and issue ownership.[[9]](#endnote-9) Importantly, while these patterns are clearly visible in Figures 1 and 2, the patterns are far from perfect. Hence, while there would appear to be a relationship between position and issue ownership, it is not a one-to-one relationship.

This relationship between position and issue ownership is analysed more systematically across countries, parties, and issues in Table 1. A dummy takes the value zero for the issues of welfare, education, and the environment where the median voter is to the left in Figure 1, and the value one for the issues of the economy, immigration, the EU, and crime where the median voter is to the right in Figure 1. The variable in Table 1 for the party positions, as visualized in Figure 2, measures the party position from left (0) to right (1). Hence, according to H1, if the dummy takes the value zero (one), an increase in the party position from 0 to 1 should have a negative (positive) effect on issue ownership because the party locates to the right when the median voter is to the left (right). This is what we see in Table 1 where the coefficient for party position in the top row is negative and statistically significant while the interaction term in the third row between party position and median voter position is positive and statistically significant. Figure 3 visualizes the result and shows a party’s issue ownership score depending on its position. As expected from H1, when the median voter is to the left (in the left part of Figure 3), a descending line describes the relationship between the extent to which a party takes a position to the right (on the x-axis) and issue ownership (on the y-axis). This means that a party’s issue ownership weakens the more it takes a position to the right – if the median voter is to the left. The same logic applies to the right part of Figure 3, where the line is increasing. Hence, when the median voter is to the right, a party has a larger issue ownership if it locates to the right. This is evidence that the party with issue ownership sides with the median voter (H1).

[Table 1 and Figure 3 about here]

Despite a substantial loss of observations (from almost 800 to about 200), the influence of party policy distance on issue ownership is also dynamic. This is evident in Table 2 from the statistically significant, positive coefficient for the first-difference version of the party proximity variable, which measures the distance between the party’s position and the median voter (0 is maximum distance and 1 is minimum distance). This reaffirms the support to Hypothesis 1. Moreover, the influence of party issue emphasis is statistically insignificant, and hence, is a first sign that proximity is more important than priority. Figure 4 visualizes the effect of changing proximity on issue ownership. The ascending line crosses the zero-line at 0 on the x-axis (no position change), and shows that when a party moves, for instance, two standard deviations (about .4 on the 0–1 scale) away from the median voter at the minimum value on the x-axis, its issue ownership decreases by 3.1 points (on the 0–100 scale), whereas its issue ownership improves 3.6 points if the party takes a position two standard deviations closer to the median voter at the maximum value on the x-axis. Hence, a party’s change to its position has a substantial impact on its issue ownership.

[Table 2 and Figure 4 about here]

Additional analyses reported in Table 3 and Figure 5 suggest that this effect operates through spatial proximity and not because a voter thinks that the party at the median voter position has issue ownership regardless of whether she agrees with this party’s position. This analysis is at the micro level, and therefore includes a measure of a voter’s issue importance (see Section IV in the appendix; Hare *et al.* 2015), but does not include a measure of party positions. Rather, based on the findings in Table 1, it assumes that the party that has issue ownership is located closest to the median voter position. Table 3 shows that the likelihood that a voter prefers the party with issue ownership is .61 if she is located at the median voter position. This likelihood declines to .58 if she is one standard deviation away and goes down to .48 if she is at maximum distance (3.7 standard deviations away). Hence, this is a not a steep decline, but it shows unequivocally that as a voter locates at greater distance from the median voter position, she is less likely to prefer the party with issue ownership to handle problems on the issue. In further support of a spatial proximity logic, Figure 5 shows that voters that are three or more standard deviations away are most likely to not prefer the party with issue ownership to handle the issue (even if the substantial difference is not dramatic).

[Table 3 and Figure 5 about here]

Based on these findings, the analysis turns to examine whether the influence of party position on issue ownership depends on the level of bimodality in the voter distribution (H2) and a party’s issue emphasis (H3). In order to simplify these tests, the analysis looks at the effect of the proximity of the party position to the median voter (1 is the minimum distance between party position and median voter) on issue ownership, and hence, it conveys the same information as in Figures 1–3, namely whether the party is located where the median voter is. Table 4 reports the results.

[Table 4 and Figures 6-7 about here]

The first column in Table 4 shows that party issue emphasis is not systematically related to issue ownership. In contrast, party distance to the median voter has a statistically significant impact on issue ownership in these columns – including when taking party issue emphasis into account. As expected, this suggests that issue ownership is about party position more than party emphasis. This also reaffirms the support to H1, namely that proximity links to issue ownership. The effect of proximity on issue ownership is noticeable: if a party is close to the median voter (proximity = 1) instead of distant (proximity = 0), its issue ownership score is predicted to increase by 6.5 percentage points. With an average issue ownership score of 26, this is a substantial change and may decide whether a party has issue ownership.

Hypothesis 2 stipulates that the influence of party proximity to the median voter on issue ownership decreases the more bimodal the voter distribution on the issue. This hypothesis is tested by an interaction term between party proximity and bimodality in the voter distribution in the second column of Table 4. The interaction term is graphed in Figure 6. In agreement with Hypothesis 2, the line in Figure 6 is descending and moves from a positive number on the x-axis to a negative number. This suggests that the effect on issue ownership of a party being close to the median voter diminishes as the voter distribution becomes less unimodal, and eventually turns negative if the distribution approximates bimodality (at bimodality above .46 in Figure 6). As the confidence interval above the horizontal zero-line to the left in Figure 6 shows, this effect is statistically significant in parts of the bimodality interval at a very unimodal voter distribution (at bimodality below .22 in Figure 6). The systematic effect in this part of the interval is noteworthy: if bimodality is zero, then issue ownership increases 14.6 percentage points if the party moves from maximum distance to minimum distance from the median voter (0–1). This effect, which is also reported in the second row in the second column of Table 4, is two-and-a-half times the unconditional effect of party proximity in the first column in Table 4. Hence, this result adds further evidence to the importance to issue ownership of party proximity to the median voter.

Hypothesis 3 is tested in the latter column of Table 4. Unlike the statistically insignificant coefficient for the effect of a party’s issue emphasis on issue ownership in the first column in Table 4, the interaction term between a party’s emphasis and its position in the third column in Table 4 is positive and statistically significant. Hence, this indicates that the reason why a party’s issue emphasis does affect issue ownership in itself (in the first column) is that we can only understand its effect in relation to its position (in the third column). Figure 7 helps to interpret this dependency by plotting the average marginal effects of a party’s issue emphasis at a party’s decreasing distance to the median voter (Figure 7a) and vice versa (Figure 7b). Figure 7a reveals that a party’s issue emphasis does not have any systematic effect on issue ownership regardless of the distance between its position and the median voter. This is visible from the dotted lines, which mark the 95 per cent confidence interval, at either side of the horizontal zero-line. This finding reaffirms the conclusion from the first column in Table 4 that a party’s issue emphasis does not systematically influence its issue ownership.

As indicated in Figure 7b, a party’s issue emphasis is instead only relevant to its issue ownership because it highlights the effect of the party’s position on issue ownership. The ascending line with a narrow 95 per cent confidence interval indicates that a party position more (less) proximate to the median voter is only substantially and systematically associated with stronger (weaker) issue ownership if the party emphasizes this position. As hypothesized in H3, the interpretation is that the party thus adds credibility to its position and shows that its position is important. As demonstrated to the left on the x-axis by the zero influence at no party issue emphasis, if a party merely takes a position without adding weight to this position and building credibility, it only marginally improves issue ownership. As soon as the party emphasizes the issue (and its position), however, the effect of proximity to the median voter on issue ownership becomes substantial: if the party emphasizes the issue at the mean value (.07 on the 0–1 scale), issue ownership is expected to increase 4.7 points (on the 0–100 scale) if the party is at the median voter position instead of at maximum distance. If the emphasis is two standard deviations above the mean (.21), the same level of proximity increases issue ownership by 12.2 points – a sizeable difference.

Importantly, these findings are robust to alternative specifications such as leaving out the control variables. Moreover, the findings are not dependent on any one issue or country[[10]](#endnote-10): the results do not change if a country or issue is excluded one at a time (see Tables A6‒A11 in the appendix).[[11]](#endnote-11) Hence, the effect applies to valence-type issues as well as position-type issues (although the effect differs depending on the shape of the voter distribution) as well as political systems with very different institutions. Furthermore, the results are substantially unchanged when using the alternative measure of party position based on data from the national election study instead of party manifestos (see Table A5 in the appendix).[[12]](#endnote-12)

**Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of a rapidly expanding research agenda on issue ownership, this study asks to what extent political parties’ issue ownership is merely basic representation of the median voter. The paper is among the first to study the influence of party position on issue ownership at the aggregate level as well as to study the joint influence of party position and party issue emphasis on issue ownership.

The analysis shows that issue ownership is largely a matter of policy representation. In that sense, sceptics of issue ownership are right: when the median voter is to the right and, say, wants closed borders but the party takes steps to host an influx of refugees, it does not earn issue ownership on immigration. A party’s position proximity to the median voter is central to issue ownership and, according to the statistical test, more important than its issue emphasis. Moreover, a party’s issue emphasis matters only in relation to its position by adding credibility to this position. This means that the party with issue ownership is the party that, by emphasizing the issue, places importance on its position close to the median voter and thereby appears credible in the eyes of the voters. With multiple issues and countries in the analysis, the opportunities to generalize these findings appear promising.

The identified influence of position on issue ownership points back to Petrocik’s constituency basis of issue ownership and therefore also the long-term stability of issue ownership. Parties are ideological entities that largely represent the same constituencies today as when they were formed, and they rarely change policy positions in a dramatic way (Budge 1994). The finding in this study that issue ownership rests on these positions therefore emphasizes the historical roots of issue ownership – a problem-handling reputation rarely changes overnight and instead is rather stable (Seeberg 2017*b*). Hence, this focus on positions for issue ownership is important because it might help to better understand the sources of issue ownership stability.

This study has important broader implications for the mass-elite linkage. Recent work in this area questions whether voters generally listen to parties (Adams *et al.* 2011). This study certainly dampens such concerns (together with other recent studies; Seeberg *et al.* 2017) and suggests that the lack of parties’ influence on voters in previous spatial research may be because these previous studies looked in the wrong place: they studied the mass–elite linkage on the overall left‒right scale, to which voters might not pay attention. As this analysis shows, however, voters surely pay attention to what is going on at the issue level, and the mass-elite linkage should therefore be studied at the issue level, even if the demands for data are much higher.

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1. In line with Petrocik’s original conception of issue ownership, this study is concerned with issue ownership as a party’s reputation among the electorate for being able to competently handle problems on an issue rather than merely voters’ ‘spontaneous association’ between a party and an issue (Walgrave *et al.* 2012; see also Stubager 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The countries are Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I used the issue content codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner *et al.* 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. To reflect the perception of welfare in the United States, this was coded as social security. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The log of emphasis to be more precise following Lowe *et al.* (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lelkes measures bimodality as *bimodality =* , where m is the skewness of the distribution, and n is the kurtosis score of the distribution. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The coding strategy adopted by Dolezal *et al.* (2013) is admirable but unrealistic to carry out across a large number of countries. The measurement strategy by Meyer and Wagner (2017) also uses CMP data but is constrained to apply only to overarching issues such as the economy, with many sub-issues from which to calculate a party’s position and emphasis on that issue. This is not the case in this analysis, which focuses on many specific issues like immigration and education. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Right-wing parties are liberal, conservative, Christian democratic, agrarian, and far-right parties, and left-wing parties are green parties, communists, socialists and social democrats (using the party families in the Comparative Manifesto Project). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The EU is unsurprisingly slightly odd, and there appears to be no connection between the position of the median voter, party positions, and issue ownership (Green-Pedersen 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. If the welfare issue is excluded or Germany is excluded, the levels of statistical significance for the party proximity variable are p < 0.13 and p < 0.15, respectively, in Tables A6-A7. If the issues of welfare or the environment are excluded or Sweden is excluded, the levels of statistical significance for the interaction term between party issue emphasis and party position proximity are p < 0.15 and p < 0.12, respectively, in Tables A8–A9. Hence, in a few instances, the reduction in the number of observations when excluding an issue or a country in the analysis generates p-values that border conventional levels of statistical significance. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The interaction between party proximity and bimodality is only statistically significant in parts of the bimodality interval (see Figure 6) and the interaction term in the second column in Table 4 therefore does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. This means that the evaluation of the robustness of the result across issues and countries is mainly concerned with the extent to which the size and direction of the coefficient changes. This does not appear to be the case. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. With this alternative measure of party proximity, the level of statistical significance for the interaction term is p < 0.11 and it remains positive. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)