

News, Discussion, and Associative Issue Ownership: Instability at the Micro Level versus Stability at the Macro Level

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Abstract

Associative issue ownership refers to one of the prerequisites for representative democracy—public awareness of the issue priorities of competing political parties. This article addresses the question of how the instability of associative issue ownership at the micro level of individual voters, which could be due in part to election news and political discussion, adds up to the relative stability of associative issue ownership at the macro level. The data come from a panel survey and a content analysis of newspapers and television news bulletins in the 2010 Dutch Parliamentary Election Campaign. Cross-nested multilevel logistic regression models were applied to estimate the impact of political news and political discussion on different respondents for different parties and issues. The findings show how contagion, by traditional issue ownership associations, explains the relative stability at the macro level in spite of volatility at the micro level. Campaign news and political discussion increase the likelihood of contagion by traditional issue priorities of political parties, while also evoking change due to their convergence on the issues of the campaign, from which the parties that own these issues take advantage, among others the VVD and the PVV in the 2010 campaign.

Keywords

agenda setting, election campaign, media effects, public opinion, voting behavior

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Representative democracy relies on citizens who base their party choice on their awareness of the issue priorities and issue proposals propagated by competing political parties. This study on *associative issue ownership* explains how media coverage and public discussion facilitate public awareness of the issue priorities that parties propagate.

The theory of issue ownership seeks to explain the role of issues both in the party choice of voters and in the strategic behavior of parties (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Benoit and Hansen 2004; Budge and Farlie 1983; Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik et al. 2003). According to issue ownership theory, voters associate parties with specific issues and evaluate parties differently on their ability to solve these issues. A party *owns* an issue when a large group of voters attributes this issue to this party (*associative issue ownership*) and considers this party to be best equipped to deal with that particular issue (*competence issue ownership*; Petrocik 1996; Walgrave et al. 2012). Parties have an electoral advantage over other parties on owned issues and are likely to win the elections when their owned issues are high on the media agenda (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik, 1996). In election campaigns, parties therefore often emphasize “owned” issues to prime their salience in the decisional calculus of voters (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003–2004; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). The majority of the work examining issue ownership makes use of the concept competence issue ownership. Attention for associative issue ownership is relatively new (see Tresch, Lefevere and Walgrave, forthcoming ; Walgrave et al. 2012).

Associative issue ownership is the equivalent of public awareness of the issue priorities of parties in the empirical research literature. “(Associative issue ownership) is the spontaneous association between issues and parties in the minds of voters, resulting from a history of attention,” as argued by Walgrave et al. (2012: 779). A common history of attention suggests that the apparent stability of associative issue ownership at the macro level of the electorate as a whole is due to the stability of associative issue ownership at the micro level of individual respondents. However, several studies suggest that associative issue ownership at the micro level of individual voters is instable in the short run, which appears to be exacerbated by media coverage and political discussion (De Bruycker and Walgrave, forthcoming; Tresch et al. 2013). Therefore, the research question of this study is as follows:

Research Question 1: How do election news and political discussion during an election campaign alter voters’ perceptions of associative issue ownership on the individual level (micro level), and how do these forces nevertheless mount up to the relative stability of associative issue ownership at the aggregate level of the electorate (macro level)?

Stability of Issue Ownership

Issue ownership is conceived as a stable party characteristic in the literature about historical cleavages between societal groups where parties originated from (e.g.,

Budge and Farlie 1983; Klingemann et al. 1994; Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Linkages between specific social groups, issues, and parties are still important to claim issue ownership (Stubager and Slothuus 2013).

Nevertheless, recent work has shown that issue ownership is not a fixed feature, especially not in multiparty systems (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009; Damore 2004; Holian 2004; Walgrave et al. 2009). In a multiparty system with ample room for issues on the media agenda, parties have no alternative but to challenge the ownership of the parties that were most successful in setting the media agenda (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Stubager and Slothuus 2013). In a multiparty system, it is exceptional that a majority of voters point to one party as the party best able to deal with an issue, which makes competence issue ownership a less useful concept in a multiparty system than associative issue ownership (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). Even parties in two-party systems converge somewhat on issue emphasis to enable dialogue (Sigelman and Buell 2004). Obviously, issue ownership is not stable yet in the case of new issues (De Bruycker and Walgrave, forthcoming). As a result, attention in the recent issue ownership literature has shifted to short-term origins of issue ownership associations at the level of voters (e.g., Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Bélanger 2003; Brasher 2009; De Bruycker and Walgrave, forthcoming).

Research shows that the media play an important role in the creation and transmission of issue profiles of parties that alter intended party choices in election campaigns (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007; Kleinnijenhuis and De Ridder 1998; Walgrave et al. 2009; Walgrave and De Swert 2007). Journalists seem to be aware of issue ownership. At least, they enforce these reputations in their writings (Hayes 2008), whereas voters are susceptible to party issue profiles displayed in the media (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Walgrave et al. 2009). On the basis of an experimental study, Walgrave et al. (2009) find that voters' perceptions of competence issue ownership are affected by media messages in the short term. In addition, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) show in a quasi-experimental study that winning televised election debates can alter voters' perceptions of a party's competence issue ownership. Tresch et al. (forthcoming) found evidence that election news affects voters' perceptions of associative ownership on the basis of a panel survey study-embedded experiment of two valence issues and four parties in Flanders.

Toward a Theory and Testable Hypotheses

Short-term effects of news coverage (e.g., Tresch et al. forthcoming) and political discussion come on top of the elementary *Stability Hypothesis* (H1), which maintains that associative issue ownership simply derives from one's previous issue ownership associations in an autoregressive process.

Stability (H1): If a respondent associates a specific party with a specific issue at the start of the election campaign, then the likelihood increases that this party will be associated with this issue by this respondent immediately after the elections.

Issue ownership may be volatile at the level of individual voters but nevertheless highly stable at the aggregate level due to *contagion* (H2). Beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors are infectious, according to contagion theories in the communication networks literature (cf. overview Monge and Contractor 2003). Voters do not experience election campaigns in isolation but as participants in various communication networks. Networks expose people, groups, and organizations to information and attitudinal messages. Recent exposure increases the likelihood that network members who forgot about the issues will include them once more in their judgment, which is the basis of priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1990). The *Contagion Hypothesis* states that especially long-term associations between parties and issues that were widespread already before an election campaign will infect voters with more idiosyncratic beliefs during an election campaign.

Contagion (H2): The higher the percentage of respondents who associated a specific party with a specific issue before the campaign, the higher the likelihood that this party will be associated with this issue by a specific respondent immediately after the elections.

The electorate is clearly not a homogeneous entity when it comes to campaign and media effects (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007; Nadeau et al. 2008). An important characteristic is the voter's level of political knowledge. Studies (e.g., Arcenaux 2006; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006) found significant differential effects of media exposure as a function of already existing political knowledge. The *Political Learning Hypothesis* simply states that whoever knows more, learns more.

Learning (H3): The more politically knowledgeable a respondent is before the campaign, the higher the likelihood that this respondent will associate a party with an issue immediately after the elections.

Attention waves for issues in the media are the driving forces of change during an election campaign. The main way voters obtain political information during the election campaign is through the mass media (Graber 2002). According to attribute agenda setting (McCombs 2004; Shehata and Strömbäck 2013), a transfer of salience is to be expected from the media to voters. Voters who read or hear about a specific party–issue combination in the news are more likely to associate this party with this issue in the future themselves. Consequently, we formulate an (attribute) *Agenda-Setting Hypothesis*:

Agenda Setting (H4): The more news on a specific party addressing a specific issue is encountered by a respondent during the election campaign in the media that he or she uses, the higher the likelihood that this party will be associated with this issue by this respondent immediately after the elections.

The news is expected to be the primary driver of change during election campaigns. However, because the news will be often about parties that address issues that were

already owned by them, the news is often expected to reinforce the ownership of parties over their traditional issues. In the case that two parties are (almost) equally associated in the news with a particular issue, we expect that as a result of contagion (H2), the party that is the (traditional) owner of the issue will benefit most.

Another way to bring to mind the issue priorities of parties is through deliberation as a result of political discussion (Eveland et al. 2011; Huckfeldt et al. 2004). It should be noted that fostering the majority belief that different parties prioritize different issues is precisely a prerequisite for the survival of political disagreement and democratic debate, which is a central concern in the literature about political discussion (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). Hence a *Deliberation Hypothesis* with respect to political discussion can be offered:

Deliberation (H5): The more a respondent is involved in political discussion, the higher the likelihood that this respondent will associate a party with an issue immediately after the elections.

News and deliberation may also moderate other effects. As the news is expected to bring *new* issue priorities of parties to the forefront, the news is expected to *weaken* the stability of associations of parties with issues in the minds of voters. In the overview of hypotheses in Figure 1, such interaction effects are visualized as arrows that become thinner or thicker.

We expect that discussion will also *weaken* stability. Both news and discussion are expected to *strengthen* the contagion effect as they expose citizens to majority beliefs that specific parties own specific issues.

Interaction Effects of H1 and H2 with H4 and H5: News about the issue position of a party with respect to an issue and political discussion will weaken the stability of a respondent's associations of that party with that issue ($H4 \times H1$ and $H5 \times H1$), strengthen the contagion effect of a society's associations of a party with that issue ($H4 \times H2$ and $H5 \times H2$).

Method

Case Selection

The Dutch electoral system is one of the most proportionally representative systems in the world, with a large number of competing political parties. In the 2010 Dutch Parliamentary election campaign, eighteen parties competed for votes. In this study, we focus on the eleven parties with seats in Parliament before the elections, namely, Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Christian Union (CU), Democrats'66 (D66), Green Left (GL), Labour Party (PvdA), Animal Party (PvdD), Freedom Party (PVV), Political Reformed Party (SGP), Socialist Party (SP), Proud of the Netherlands (TON),

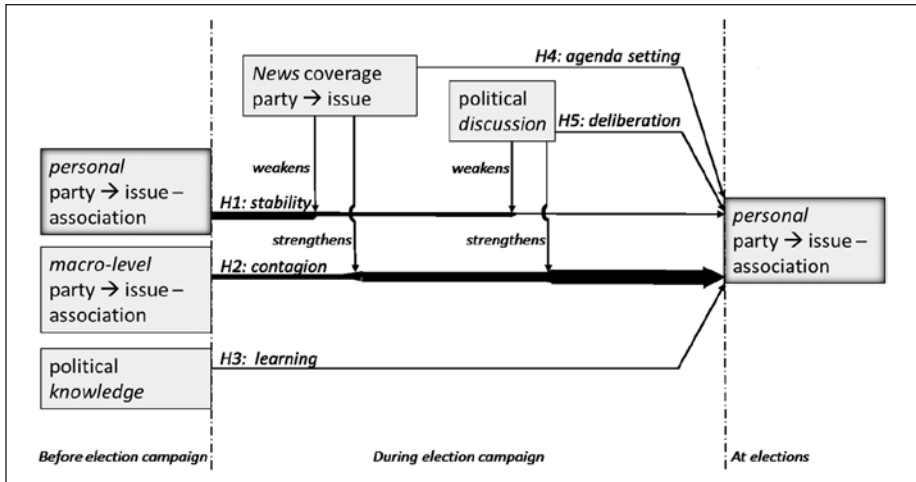


Figure 1. Conceptual path model to explain associative issue ownership at individual level. The expectation of decreasing stability in the election campaign at the individual level is represented with a decreased width of the stability arrow (H1). The increasing chance of contagion is represented with an increased width of the contagion arrow (H2).

and Liberal Party (VVD). All except for one (TON) maintained seats, whereas no new parties gained seats. In extremely fragmented party systems, parties are initially able to emphasize a much more specific set of issues to speak to their own voters than in less fragmented party systems. However, as the parties will not all be able to put their issues onto the media agenda, they are likely to engage in a fierce battle over issue ownership.

Data

The present study combines panel survey data and content analysis data. Survey data from the same respondents at more than one moment in time enable the measurement of shifts in issue ownership within subjects, in addition to shifts between subjects as is the case in experiments. Detailed questions about media use enabled a link to content analysis data for the media that were actually used by specific respondents.

Panel survey data. The survey data stem from an eleven-wave panel survey conducted by polling organization IntomartGfK during the 2010 Dutch Parliamentary Election Campaign. This panel contained extensive questions about the use of a broad variety of newspapers and TV news bulletins, a broad range of questions about associative and competitive issue ownership with respect to twenty political issues that dominated the news, as well as most other variables encountered in election research, such as political discussion, political knowledge, and social demographic variables. We use especially the data collected in the

two waves in which associative issue ownership was assessed, which were the pre-campaign wave (wave 1) and the post-electoral wave (wave 11). The first wave conducted on April 8-10 contained 1,801 respondents and the eleventh and last wave held on June 10-14 contained 1,362 respondents (retention rate = 75.6 percent). This survey consists of a cluster sample of respondents that is representative for the Dutch electorate, in terms of 2006 party preferences, turnout in 2006, and sociodemographic variables. We restrict our data analysis to the 1,362 respondents who participated in both waves. Panel attrition was not at all related to gender, education, and party preference, but it was very weakly related to political knowledge (less than 0.5 percent explained variance).

Content analysis data. We analyzed the news from seven national newspapers (*Algemeen Dagblad*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*, *Spits*, and *Metro*) and two television stations: *NOS* (a public broadcasting company) and *RTL* (a commercial broadcasting company). The period that was covered in the news is the entire period in between the first and last wave of the panel survey. The coding of the articles was conducted using the Network of Evaluative Texts (NET) procedure, a semantic network analysis method (Kriesi et al. 2008; Van Cuilenburg et al. 1986). The NET method divides a text into a number of so-called “elementary statements.” Here “Party (representative)/predicate (pro or con)/Issue Position” statements for eleven parties and twenty issues matter ($n = 2,905$).

Coding was performed during the campaign by a team of coders with the iNet-coding module of the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit AMCAT (Van Atteveldt, 2008). Intercoder agreement between three coders with respect to the presence or absence of party statements about issues in fifty-three news articles amounted to 91 percent. Intercoder reliability as measured by Krippendorff’s alpha for interval-level measurements amounted to .70.

Linking media content to the respondents. The content analysis variables were aggregated per medium, and within each medium for each combination of eleven parties, twenty issues and weeks. Survey questions to measure to which newspapers and televised news broadcasts a respondent exposed himself or herself were used to calculate the number of news items that he or she could have possibly encountered about a specific combination of a party with an issue in a given week. For each of these combinations, a respondent’s news score was calculated as a weighted sum of the amount of news items, with weights depending on the frequency of the use of each medium. If *NOS* television news reported two times about a party–issue combination, and *De Volkskrant* four times, then the weighted sum for a respondent who always watches *NOS* news and who reads *de Volkskrant* once a week ($=1/6$ since Dutch newspapers do not appear on Sundays) would amount to $\frac{(1 \times 2) + (1 / 6 \times 4)}{1 + 1/6} = \frac{16}{7} = 2.29$. Note that this procedure amounts to media weights at the aggregate level that reflect the size of the audience of each medium.

Operationalization

Issue ownership is measured traditionally with questions about which party is best able to solve the most important national problems. Nevertheless, this operationalization of issue ownership is limited. Questions about problems do not reveal associations with issues (e.g., employment) for which problematic real-world developments (e.g., huge unemployment) are temporarily absent (Sheafer 2007). “Best able” is moreover easily confounded with party preference (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Van der Brug 2004). Associative issue ownership is operationalized here with questions geared toward measuring voter perceptions of the issue salience of parties (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings 2001).

Associative issue ownership at the individual level is operationalized as whether a respondent associates a party with an issue spontaneously (1 = yes; 0 = no). To measure associative issue ownership, respondents were asked, both in the pre-campaign wave in the first week of April and in the post-election wave in the days after the elections on June 9, which issues come to mind if he or she thinks about that party in the first place, and in the second place. Respondents could choose from a list of twenty predefined newsworthy issues and were free to add other issues as well. The analysis is restricted to the twenty predefined issues because only 2.5 percent of the responses referred to other issues. Due to the question format with two questions for each of the eleven parties, it was possible for voters to list twenty-two associations. For respondents who participated in both waves, the average number of issue associations was 13.7 issues in the pre-election wave and 15.5 issues in the post-election wave, which indicates an average campaign effect of 1.8 additional issue associations.

Associative issue ownership at the societal level is measured as the number of other respondents who associate a specific party with a specific issue (or more precisely, the logarithm from this number plus one, so as to avoid conclusions based on outliers). This variable runs between 0.69 and 6.86.

News Attention for the coverage of the association between a specific party and a specific issue was defined as the logarithm (with base 2) of the number of news statements (plus one) about it in the media used by the respondent (cf. section on linking media content to respondents above), which results in a measure ranging from 0 to 5.25. Logarithms assume that percentage changes rather than absolute changes in news attention matter.

Political Knowledge is measured on the basis of twelve items. In the first wave of the survey, the respondents watched four photos displaying politicians, after which they were asked to mention the name of the politician, the party he or she belonged to, and his or her political office. On average, respondents were able to answer eight questions correctly. Cronbach's alpha of this index is 0.85. At the level of respondents, we also included sociodemographic variables such as *Gender* (0 = female; 1 = male).

Political Discussion was measured with the question how the respondent reacted to political discussions. Not participating was coded as 0, listening but not expressing opinions was coded as 0.5, and expressing an opinion as 1.

Model Specification

Units of analysis on which the data analysis rests are combinations of 1,362 respondents, who participated in the first and last waves of the panel survey study, eleven parties, and twenty issues, which results in $n = (1,362 \times 11 \times 20 =) 299,640$ units of analysis. As associative issue ownership is a binary variable, a cross-nested logistic multilevel model with respondents, parties, and issues as equivalent higher order levels is appropriate. Some hypotheses, such as H3 (knowledge) and H5 (discussion), predict an effect across the board that is not restricted to specific issues and parties. The precise sources of variation per hypothesis will be detailed in Table 3.

All independent variables were standardized, which has two advantages: (1) the sizes of “unstandardized” regression estimates based on standardized values for different independent variables in a logistic regression can be compared in an intuitive way and (2) multilevel models without Bayesian priors tend to run into convergence problems less often.

Results

Issue Ownership at the Macro Level

Table 1 gives an aggregate overview of voters' perceptions of issue ownership of twenty issues by eleven parties before and after the 2010 Dutch parliamentary election campaign. The more shaded the cell is, the more often voters associate a specific party with a specific issue.

Table 1 first of all shows that voters perceive differences between the eleven parties in the ownership of these twenty issues. This is in line with Walgrave et al. (2012), Aalberg and Jenssen (2007), and Bélanger and Meguid (2008). We will discuss Table 1 from left to right, as parties are sorted from left to right and issues from bottom to top according to the number of associations.

The PVV (anti-immigrant party) strengthens its associative issue ownership of asylum seekers and immigrants (from 70 to 84 percent). An interesting case is that the VVD was able to strengthen its issue ownership of the mortgage interest tax rebate (from 25 to 41 percent) in spite of, or as a result of, the campaign strategy of the CDA to capture issue ownership (from 15 to 27 percent). Thus, the shifts in voters' perceptions of associative ownership suggest that the campaign by and large strengthens issue ownership, which is in line with the preliminary findings of Tresch et al. (2013). The clearest case of issue ownership is entrepreneurship because three-quarters of the respondents associate entrepreneurship with the Liberal Party (VVD).

The correlation of associative issue ownership perceptions between the pre-campaign and post-electoral waves is .95 at the aggregate level as compared with .34 at the individual level. Thus, associative issue ownership is highly stable at the aggregate level but volatile at the individual level. In the pre-campaign wave, the respondents make 10,993 party issue associations, of which 7,662 survive in the post-electoral

Table 1. Issue Ownership of Twenty Issues for Eleven Parties (Percent per Party of Issues Associated with Party before and after 2010 Campaign, $n = 1,362$ Respondents).

Issue	PVV	VVD	PvdA	CDA	GL	SP	D66	TON	CU	PvdD	SGP
Asylum seekers and immigrants											
Pre	70	6	8	2	4	5	2	40	1	1	2
Post	84	8	16	2	4	4	1	46	1	0	2
Norms and values											
Pre	2	2	2	38	3	2	1	3	42	3	34
Post	3	1	5	42	3	3	3	4	50	6	36
Social security											
Pre	0	2	25	4	15	35	6	2	8	1	5
Post	1	3	40	6	21	42	8	2	11	2	6
Taxes and cuts in government expenditures											
Pre	5	23	17	19	5	8	11	12	7	2	4
Post	4	39	14	21	6	7	12	6	6	1	6
Nature and environment											
Pre	0	0	1	0	47	2	2	0	1	46	1
Post	0	0	1	0	58	2	1	0	2	59	0
Mortgage interest tax rebate											
Pre	2	25	25	15	6	7	12	3	4	1	1
Post	5	41	17	27	4	9	13	1	2	0	1
Crime											
Pre	37	9	3	3	2	2	2	21	4	1	4
Post	42	9	5	3	1	3	2	29	4	1	4
Education											
Pre	0	3	7	2	9	6	26	1	10	1	5
Post	1	3	7	3	10	8	30	1	10	0	4
Health care											
Pre	1	3	7	6	8	15	7	2	8	1	4
Post	4	5	13	7	11	24	7	1	8	1	3
Pensions of the elderly											
Pre	6	3	12	7	3	16	5	1	2	0	2
Post	14	6	13	10	3	25	6	1	3	1	2
Administrative renewal											
Pre	2	5	3	1	3	2	29	5	2	1	2
Post	2	7	3	3	7	5	32	4	2	1	1
Employment											
Pre	0	6	16	3	4	12	5	2	3	1	1
Post	0	9	18	3	6	11	4	1	2	1	1
Agriculture											
Pre	0	0	0	10	6	1	1	0	1	24	3
Post	0	0	0	7	4	0	1	0	1	32	2
Developmental aid											
Pre	4	2	5	2	7	3	2	2	5	2	4
Post	5	1	6	2	8	3	2	1	6	3	4

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Issue	PVV	VVD	PvdA	CDA	GL	SP	D66	TON	CU	PvdD	SGP
Entrepreneurship											
Pre	0	30	1	0	0	1	2	4	0	0	1
Post	0	28	1	1	1	1	2	3	0	0	1
Missions Dutch army abroad											
Pre	1	2	14	17	2	2	1	1	5	0	1
Post	1	1	8	12	1	1	1	0	2	0	1
European cooperation											
Pre	1	4	2	12	2	2	8	1	2	1	1
Post	2	1	2	13	2	1	9	1	3	1	1
Efficient government											
Pre	4	7	1	1	2	3	6	7	1	1	1
Post	3	3	1	1	2	2	4	2	1	1	1
Accessibility and mobility											
Pre	1	12	1	5	3	1	2	6	0	1	1
Post	0	7	1	3	3	1	2	5	1	1	1
Fighting terror											
Pre	12	2	0	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	1
Post	7	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	0	0	0

The percentage of voters who associated the PVV with asylum seekers and immigrants increased from 70 to 84 percently. Party names and party families to which parties belong were explained below Figure 1.

wave. However, they gain 13,497 party issue associations during the campaign, which resulted by and large in strengthened issue ownership at the aggregate level.

Table 2 gives an aggregate overview of the attention in the media for party statements about issues with respect to issues according to the Dutch media, as a weighted average across media that were actually used by respondents. Media attention for party statements about issues is equivalent to the media attention for issue positions of parties. Rows and columns are presented in the same order as in Table 1. The higher the number in the cell is, the more often the association was covered by the media. Comparing Table 2 with Table 1 confirms at a glance that the media reflect issue ownership. The PVV prioritizes the issue of asylum seekers and immigrants, the ecologist party GL prioritizes nature and the environment, the right-wing VVD focuses on crime, and so on. In line with U.S. campaigns (Sigelman and Buell 2002), the parties converged on the issues, at least according to the media, most notably on news about taxes and government expenditures.

The content analysis data reveal that parties converged especially on news about a 4 billion euro government loan of the Dutch government to Greece, and about ramifications of the necessity of future cuts in government expenditures by government advisory bodies. Issue ownership theory predicts that the issue owner (i.e., the VVD) will benefit from this news.

The impact of associative issue ownership on the vote is beyond the scope of this article. However, it seems that this prediction came true. The VVD became the largest

party in the Netherlands (from twenty-two to thirty-one seats) for the first time in their history. The PVV included the Greeks in its aversion against immigrants and achieved the largest increase in the number of seats (from nine to twenty-four seats). Both parties became indispensable for the coalition government after the elections.

Issue Ownership at the Micro Level

We now turn to the individual level with the help of our cross-nested multilevel logistic regression model. We will present four different models. Model 1 is the “empty” model, which is basically an analysis of variance that attributes differences in associative issue ownership to differences between respondents, between parties, and between issues. The random intercept effects for model 1 show that the variation in respondents’ associations of parties with issues has to do with the nature of issues first, with respondents’ characteristics second, and finally with the features of parties. The empty model explains about 8.7 percent of issue ownership associations as measured by Nagelkerke’s R^2 .

The fit of each subsequent model is better than the fit of the previous one, which is apparent from the decreasing Akaike information criterion (AIC) and deviance information criterion (DIC) scores and the increasing scores for Nagelkerke’s R^2 . Model 2 adds fixed effects for all independent variables, except for news and political discussion. This model shows a significant positive effect of voters’ associative issue ownership perceptions in the pre-election wave (H1) and a significant positive contagion effect (H2). We see that voters are likely to associate an issue with the same party as they did in the pre-election wave and that the more respondents associate a particular party with a particular issue in the pre-election wave, the more likely it is that a specific respondent will hold this association in the post-election wave. In addition, we find a significant positive effect for political knowledge. Especially voters with a high level of political knowledge are likely to become aware of more associations (H3).

In addition to the previous variables, model 3 displays a positive significant effect for news attention and political discussion. This tells us that the more news a party obtains with its issues, the more likely the voter is to associate the party with its issues afterward (H4). Involvement in political discussion increases the likelihood that a respondent will associate a party with an issue across the board (H5).

Model 4 includes as interaction effects that both news attention and political discussion weaken the effect of one’s personal associations between parties and issues, while strengthening the effect of widely held societal associations. Generally speaking, campaigns revitalize the collective memory of traditional issue ownership associations. Campaign news and political discussions have a *mainstreaming* effect. This revitalization of issue ownership due to the media is striking as the media also show a strong tendency to converge on the issues of a specific campaign (cf. Table 2).

We tested whether model 4 could be improved by including more sociodemographic variables (education, age, gender) as well as more subtle effects of knowledge. Only gender shows a small additional effect: Men tend to associate parties more often with issues than women. The finding that higher level of knowledge is associated with

Table 2. Attention for Issue Positions/Issue Association by Party in the National Media (Number of Items with Issue Associations per Party Averaged across Media Use Respondents).

Issue	PVV	PvdA	VVD	CDA	GL	SP	D66	TON	CU	PvdD	SGP
Asylum seekers and immigrants	6.8	3.0	2.7	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1
Norms and values	0.2	2.9	0.7	1.7	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.0	1.7	0.0	3.6
Social security	1.1	3.6	4.5	2.3	2.1	0.6	1.8	0.0	0.8	0.1	0.2
Taxes and government expenditures	3.5	15.6	15.6	11.2	5.1	5.2	5.4	0.8	3.7	0.8	0.9
Nature and environment	0.8	1.3	0.9	2.6	3.3	0.4	0.8	0.0	1.5	1.2	1.0
Mortgage interest tax rebate	0.5	3.1	2.6	4.1	1.9	0.8	1.9	0.0	0.6	0.3	0.0
Crime	1.9	3.2	6.1	4.4	3.4	0.7	1.1	0.0	0.4	0.3	0.9
Health care	0.4	2.8	2.1	1.3	0.6	1.4	0.5	0.1	0.8	0.5	0.2
Education	0.6	4.5	3.3	3.5	0.9	1.1	3.0	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.6
Pensions of the elderly	0.8	4.1	0.9	1.5	1.0	1.7	1.0	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.0
Administrative renewal	2.1	1.8	0.6	0.6	1.8	0.1	1.6	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0
Employment	0.6	2.7	3.3	2.3	1.0	1.3	1.0	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.2
Agriculture	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0
Developmental aid	1.0	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.0
Entrepreneurship	0.4	1.6	1.3	0.9	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.1	0.5	0.0	0.1
Missions Dutch army abroad	0.5	4.8	0.3	0.2	1.6	0.4	1.4	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.2
European cooperation	0.9	0.0	1.1	0.6	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
Efficient government	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0
Accessibility and mobility	0.1	1.2	4.9	3.9	1.6	0.7	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Fighting terror	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Row percent distribution issue associations between parties	9	20	22	16	10	6	8	1	5	2	3

The bottom row shows that Dutch citizens encountered, given their personal choice of news media, on average the VVD in 22 percent of the news statements about issues. The remaining cells represent the average amount of news items about positions of specific parties with regard to specific issues to which respondents attended. The number of items per party–issue combination is the outcome of (1) the weekly (lack of) attention of individual respondents for specific news media and (2) the amount of news in each of these news media in each of these weeks about each specific party–issue combination.. Party names and party families to which parties belong were explained below Figure 1.

resistance to associations in the news (in line with Zaller 1992) disappears after the inclusion of contagion effects in the model. Presumably one’s resistance is restricted to uncommon associations in the news due to one’s infection by opinions held by the majority of society. One may expect that frequent participation in the waves of the panel survey during the election campaign results in a higher level of political knowledge, with a similar effect as a priori political knowledge (H3). This is true, although the effect is small. Allowing for random slopes shows that the effects of issue news were strongest for news about asylum seekers and immigration, whereas the effects of party news were strongest for news about the PVV. The significance of the variables in model 4 was not affected by any of these refinements.

A Closer Look at the Interaction Effects between News, Discussion, and Contagion

The goodness-of-fit measures in Table 3 do not immediately reveal the substantive impact of the inclusion of interaction effects in model 4. The regression curves in Figure 2 show how contagion (H2) depends on the news (left pane $H2 \times H4$) and on political discussion (right pane $H2 \times H5$). At the horizontal axis, the percentage of the population that associated an issue already with a party before the campaign is plotted, and at the vertical axis, the probability is plotted that a voter who did not associate that party with that issue before the campaign will do so after the campaign. Without contagion, a completely flat regression line will show up.

The regression curves in the left pane show that the probability that a party will be associated with an issue in the mind of voters who did not make this association before the campaign depends heavily on the percentage of the population according to which the issue was owned already before the campaign, especially when the party is often associated with this issue in the news.

Figure 2 implies that this probability was high in the case of the PVV and the issue of asylum seekers and immigrants, since 70 percent of the voters associated the PVV already with this issue before the campaign (cf. Table 1) although the PVV attracted not the maximum amount of attention for this issue in the 2010 campaign (cf. Table 2). Figure 2 implies also that this probability was high in the case of the VVD and the issue of taxes and cuts in government expenditures, since this association achieved the maximum amount of news, although the VVD was not already an absolute issue owner before the campaign like the PVV (23 percent instead of 70 percent, cf. Table 1).

Voters who do not attend to the news are on average still vulnerable for contagion by majority opinions (dotted regression line in left pane) in contrast to voters who do not even listen to political discussions (dotted regression line in right pane). Apparently political discussion is a prerequisite to become aware that many fellow citizens really believe that specific parties prioritize specific issues, whereas attention to newspapers and television is not indispensable here.

Figure 2 shows all in all at a glance that the interaction effects included in model 4 of Table 4 bear, *on average*, a substantive impact in spite of the considerable variation between respondents, parties, and issues that is apparent from the variance of the random intercepts in Table 4.

Discussion

What are the relevance and theoretical implications of this study for the field and which future lines of research can be identified? Public awareness of the issue priorities that parties propagate is a key concern of representative democracy. Whether voters are aware of issue priorities of parties is captured in the recent literature about the concept of associative issue ownership (Tresch et al., forthcoming; Walgrave et al. 2012). This article aimed to connect the early research findings that show overall stability of issue ownership at the aggregate level (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996)

Table 3. Logistic Multilevel Regression to Explain Personal Party–Issue Associations/Associative Issue Ownership at the Elections.

Model		2			3			[4]		
Fixed Effects	Hypothesis	B	SE	Significance	B	SE	Significance	B	SE	Significance
H1	Issue ownership inertia	0.312	0.005	***	0.310	0.005	***	0.369	0.014	***
H2	Issue ownership contagion	1.374	0.012	***	1.355	0.012	***	1.030	0.024	***
H3	Political knowledge	0.218	0.015	***	0.169	0.016	***	0.168	0.016	***
H4	News				0.064	0.011	***	-0.393	0.043	***
H5	Discussion				0.117	0.016	***	-0.200	0.045	***
H4 × H1	News weakens H1							-0.040	0.008	***
H4 × H2	News strengthens H2							0.265	0.042	***
H5 × H1	Discussion weakens H1							-0.037	0.014	***
H5 × H2	Discussion strengthens H2							0.482	0.038	**
Fixed intercept		-2.902	0.191	***	-3.680	0.093	***	-3.654	0.092	***
Random intercepts variance										
Parties (n = 11)	par	0.080			0.029			0.027		
Issues (n = 20)	iss	0.584			0.117			0.113		
Respondents (n = 1,362)	resp	0.198			0.192			0.175		
Goodness of fit										
AIC		142.372			106.977			106.667		
DIC		142.364			106.963			106.641		
Nagelkerke's R ²		.087			.356			.358		

Variation sources: par = across parties; iss = across issues; resp = across respondents; AIC = Akaike information criterion; DIC = deviance information criterion. SE = standard error; H1 = Stability Hypothesis; H2 = Contagion; H3 = Learning; H4 = Agenda Setting; H5 = Deliberation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

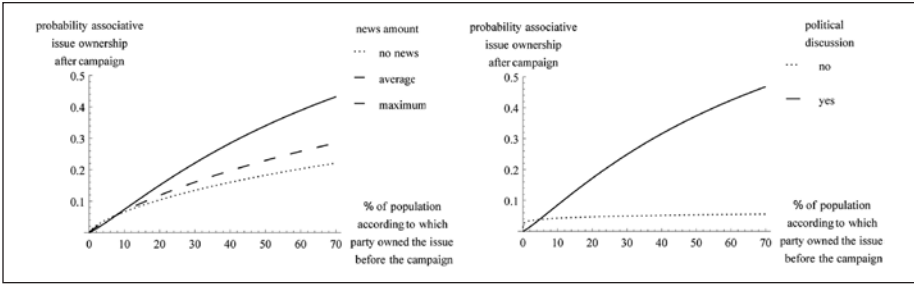


Figure 2. Interaction effects of news, discussion, and contagion to account for the probability of associative issue ownership after the campaign.

The figure is based on the regression coefficients for the variables in model 4 of Table 3, which represent average effects across respondents, parties, and issues, and on the original values of these variables rather than on standardized values. Both panes share as assumptions the absence of an association of the party with the issue before the campaign and an average amount of political knowledge. The left pane assumes moreover an average amount of discussion and the right pane an average amount of news.

and recent research that shows instability at the level of individual voters, most notably due to the news in the mass media (e.g., Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Walgrave et al. 2009; Walgrave and De Swert 2007).

This non-experimental study brings data together about a large number of parties, issues, media, and respondents before, during, and immediately after the 2010 Dutch election campaign. The findings confirm that associative issue ownership is rather unstable at the individual level, especially due to news attention peaks for specific issues, that is, financial support for Greece and cuts in government expenditures. The parties who already owned the issues in the news—most notably VVD and PVV—could strengthen their ownership and could win at the 2010 elections, which confirms the not-so-minimal impact of the media when political issues are at stake (Shehata and Strömbäck 2013).

The empirical evidence strongly suggests that contagion is the missing link through which issue ownership associations at the individual level are infected by collective issue ownership associations that were vested already before the election campaign. This contagion effect generates not only stability at the macro level of the electorate but also instability at the level of individual voters who bring their idiosyncratic associations in line with more widely held issue ownership associations. A cross-nested multilevel regression analysis reveals that attention to the news and political discussions are major channels through which contagion occurs. Without political discussion, contagion appears to be almost impossible.

However, this study also has its limitations. Issue ownership associations were only measured in two waves of a panel before and after a single election campaign. Future studies should attempt to collect longitudinal data on more elections. This would allow us to estimate the durability of the contagion effect, that is, that voters who forgot about issue ownership will tend to associate parties once again with their owned issues

after a few years, or even decades. This study shows an autonomous role for associative issue ownership, but it is also worthwhile to examine the combined effect of associative and competence ownership, and to incorporate the effect of news about successes and failures of parties (“horse race news”) on the latter (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007). This would allow us to assess whether it is indeed easier to change perceptions of competence issue ownership than of associative issue ownership as argued by Walgrave et al. (2009). The field would benefit from comparative work on issue ownership, because the Dutch case examined here is one of the most fragmented party systems in the world. Other party systems and other media systems may yield other opportunity structures to converge on the issues (Sigelman and Buell 2004), or to focus on niche issues. However, we do not see convincing a priori reasons why the findings would not be generalizable.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of this study, we consider it as a major dual insight—also from the normative point of view of democratic deliberation—that campaign news and political discussion strengthen both stability and change. Political news and political discussion strengthen stability by raising especially the awareness of traditional issue priorities of political parties. They evoke change as well due to their convergence on the issues of the campaign from which especially the parties who own these issues will benefit.

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