

Original Article

EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ISSUE IMPORTANCE AND VOTING PREFERENCES: CONNECTING AGENDA SETTING, PRIMING, AND ISSUE OWNERSHIP

Sophie Brown

University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract: Understanding the perceived importance and relevance of issues lies at the core of agenda setting, priming, and issue ownership research. In the realm of agenda setting, the fundamental concept revolves around the transfer of salience across agendas, with a predominant focus on the transmission of salience from the media to the public agenda (McCombs, 2014; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Priming theory, on the other hand, illuminates why certain issues take precedence in shaping subsequent evaluations, particularly those related to political leaders (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009).

The salience of issues in the minds of voters is closely linked to the principles of issue ownership theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). This theory posits that political parties and candidates strive to mobilize voters by emphasizing issues in which they possess a reputation for competence. Consequently, support for political parties hinges on the issues they are perceived to own during election periods (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008, p. 477).

This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of agenda setting, priming, and issue ownership, highlighting their interconnectedness and the pivotal role they play in shaping public perception and political outcomes.

Keywords: Agenda setting, priming, issue ownership, political parties, public perception.

Introduction

The perceived importance and relevance of issues are central concerns of agenda setting, priming, and issue ownership research. In agenda setting, the basic conceptual premise is the transfer of salience across agendas, with most work focusing on the transfer of salience from the media to the public agenda (McCombs, 2014; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Priming helps explain why some issues and not others are used to form subsequent evaluations, for example, of political leaders (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009). When issues become salient in voters' minds, voters are primed to use these issues as standards for evaluating contenders for election. This process is linked to issue-ownership theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003), according to which "parties and their candidates attempt to mobilize voters by emphasizing issues on which they hold a reputation of competence. Political parties, in turn, receive support on the basis of those issues that they are perceived to own at election time" (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008, p. 477).

Despite the shared concern with issue salience, the literature has largely neglected to examine the role of agenda setting and priming in influencing issue ownership outcomes *within a single analysis*. A key theoretical purpose

Original Article

of this study is thus to try to integrate agenda setting, priming, and issue —ownership within a single model. From a theory-building perspective, this integration is paramount for understanding the antecedents and consequences of public opinion formation around issues in voter decision-making processes. Individually, these perspectives provide insights into distinct processes, but their integration affords a more holistic view of determinants and consequences of issue salience.

A systematic integration of agenda setting, priming, and issue ownership would require a program of research. As an initial exploration, we will investigate how attention to political news and interpersonal political discussion influence issue decision salience (agenda setting), how issue decision salience influences party issue evaluation and party leader evaluation (priming), and how party issue evaluation and party leader evaluation influence vote choice (issue ownership).

Empirically we will focus on the 2006 Swedish election and the issue of unemployment, a promising context for our purposes. The most important issue in the electorate was unemployment, traditionally owned by the Social Democrats, who according to issue-ownership theory should have benefited but nevertheless lost (Martinsson, 2009; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). As we infer below, the election result suggests that agenda setting and priming may have constituted a critical influence counteracting the Social Democrats' reputation for competence in handling unemployment. The data also allowed us to measure *issue decision salience* rather than general issue salience, which is beneficial as it offers a highly focused indicator of salience that helps forge linkages between priming and issue ownership. Described in more detail below, issue decision salience distinguishes issues that are important in a general sense from those that are important to vote choice or other political decisions such as volunteering or making a donation.

Issue Ownership and Agenda Setting

According to issue-ownership theory, competing parties and their candidates attempt to mobilize and win votes not by talking about the same issues, but by emphasizing issues that they are perceived to “own” (Budge & Farlie, 1983). Though the origins of issue ownership remain ambiguous (cf. Petrocik, 1996; Sides, 2006; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), there is some consensus that the issues parties are perceived to own are rooted in sociopolitical constituencies (Budge & Farlie, 1983). Generally speaking, issue ownership is about parties being associated with particular issues and having a reputation for handling those issues well. It thus includes both an associative dimension and a reputation for competence in handling different issues (cf. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). Our analysis will focus on the latter dimension—the reputation for competence and the instability of reputation that might occur when an issue made salient in media and interpersonal communication becomes important in voting decisions.

Issue ownership is mostly believed to be a rather stable phenomenon (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Martinsson, 2009; Petrocik, 1996), although parties “may briefly lose credibility on their issues due to the vengeance of a temporarily dissatisfied electorate” (Holian, 2004, p. 98). Petrocik (1996, p. 827) thus distinguishes between durable issue ownership and short-term ownership or a “lease,” when a “challenger acquires an advantage, a performance-based ownership of the issue, from his irrefutable demonstration that the incumbent party cannot handle the job.”

Recent research suggests, however, that issue ownership might not be as stable as often is assumed and that issue agendas often converge during election campaigns (Damore, 2005; Holian, 2004; Sides, 2006). When new issues emerge, several parties claim ownership, and when real-world conditions lead to wide consensus about what the most important issues are, parties attempt to capitalize on those issues whether they own them or not (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Sides, 2006). Furthermore, in competitive campaigns, parties cannot feasibly ignore opponents but have to rebut rivals and address issues other than those they own. Thus, parties take into consideration not only what issues they own but also what their competitors do, what issues voters think are important, and what issues media focus on (Damore, 2005; Sides, 2006). These contingencies suggest that issue ownership is more dynamic than many traditional accounts of the theory assume, and that a full understanding of

Original Article

issue ownership requires consideration of how voters themselves perceive parties with respect to issue ownership or loss of that ownership. A focus on voter cognition consequently positions news media attention and interpersonal political communication as evaluative processes that might lead voters to rethink a party's performance on a salient issue.

Also, theory development in issue ownership seems to suggest a series of connections among news media coverage, individual cognition, party and candidate performance, and issue ownership evaluations (Banda, 2014; Belluci, 2006; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014). While the present study replicates some of these empirical linkages, we are also proposing an integrative model that, we believe, illustrates a logical coherence among linkages often explored in isolation from each other. In this context, agenda setting and priming are key processes that might help explain how issue ownership is influenced, particularly in contexts when issue ownership is dynamic.

Agenda-setting theory originated in research on the emergence of political issues and the role of mass media in setting the public issue agenda (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). An implicit linkage between agenda setting and issue ownership has consequently existed for quite some time. However, whereas agenda setting provides an understanding of how issues come to be important in public opinion, it falls short of offering a framework for exploring how issue salience can influence decision-making during election cycles.

The basic premise of agenda-setting theory is that "the amount of press coverage that issues receive gives individuals salience cues with which they learn the relative importance of issues" (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007, p. 37). The formation of media agendas follows inadvertently from journalism's gatekeeping function (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001), addressing the need to be selective when covering public affairs, although political actors certainly attempt to drive agenda priorities through public relations efforts and information subsidies (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011).

Beyond media, interpersonal communication has received some attention as an antecedent of issue salience, particularly regarding whether it enhances or diminishes agenda-setting and priming effects. Although evidence has been inconclusive (Druckman, 2004; Mendelsohn, 1996; Wanta, 1997; Yang & Stone, 2003), research on political socialization suggests that for young adults, interpersonal communication increases the salience of issues beyond the salience attributed to news media attention (Kioussis & McDevitt, 2008).

In agenda-setting research, the amount of issue coverage is the main operational indicator of issue salience on the media agenda. The chief indicator of public issue-salience is the measure of people's responses to "most important problem" questions (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2014; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). When political agendas are examined, the content of political ads, press releases, and other political communications are used as indicators of issue salience (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008; Yeon, Choi, & Kioussis, 2007).

In issue-ownership research, to the extent that issue salience is measured at the individual level and not treated as a macro-level phenomenon (as in the original formulation by Budge and Farlie, 1983), public perceptions of issue importance are commonly used (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Martinsson, 2009; van der Brug, 2004). This approach is consistent with measurement in both the agenda-setting and priming literatures. Issue salience in the media and political agendas is often measured through content analyses of news coverage, party manifestos, political ads, and other political messaging (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Damore, 2005; Petrocik, 1996; Sides, 2006; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

Working toward a synthesis of these theoretical perspectives, we propose that agenda setting provides a conceptual framework for tracing the antecedents of issue salience formation in public opinion, and that issue ownership helps explain how issue salience in public opinion can shape vote choice. Whereas recent research has connected agenda-setting theory with voter turnout by integrating it with the hierarchy-of-effects perspective and

Original Article

the catastrophe theory of attitudes (Kiousis & McDevitt, 2008), issue-ownership theory is valuable for predicting voter decision-making, the focal outcome of this analysis.

Consequences of Issue Salience

Another key concept, priming, explains why some issues become more salient than others when people evaluate political parties and leaders. In assessing political objects, people tend to sample the most accessible considerations (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2009; Zaller, 1992). Thus, issues become salient through a transfer of salience from the media to the public agenda. The same issues subsequently are salient again when people judge parties or candidates and cast votes.

The more political actors emphasize certain issues—whether in their controlled communications or in news media reports—the more accessible the association between the political actors and the issues becomes in the minds of voters (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998). As such, issue salience is an important predictor in both priming and issue ownership. As a case in point, Bélanger and Meguid (2008) showed that when issue salience was low—as measured by responses to the question “How important are the following issues to you personally in this election?”—only five out of 20 cases showed significant effects of issue ownership on vote choice, compared to 14 out of 20 cases when issue salience was moderate and 16 out of 20 cases when issue salience was high. Bélanger and Meguid (2008) consequently advanced a conditional model of issue ownership, such that “a party’s issue competence will affect a voter’s behavior *only* if the issue in question is considered salient” (p. 489).

An important but seldom recognized distinction, though, separates issue salience in general and *issue decision salience*. Theoretically, an issue might be considered salient without necessarily being important for how people vote or make other decisions. The commonest measurement of issue salience among the public is “what is the most important problem” (MIP) questions, but responses to such question do not necessarily reveal how important different issues are in deciding how to vote. Furthermore, as Wlezien argued, “MIP responses confuse at least two very different characteristics of issues—the ‘importance’ of issues and the degree to which they are a ‘problem’” (2005, p. 556). His longitudinal analysis suggested that MIP responses are “largely driven by problem status” and “tell us little, if anything, about the importance of issues” (2005, p. 575). For theoretical models that hinge on issue salience, he recommends survey items that “ask people about the importance of different issues” (2005, p. 575). For our purposes, then, issue decision salience is a better measure than general issue salience, as it directly identifies how important issues are when people decide what party to vote for. Issue decision salience is consequently highly valuable for linking agenda setting, priming, and issue ownership.

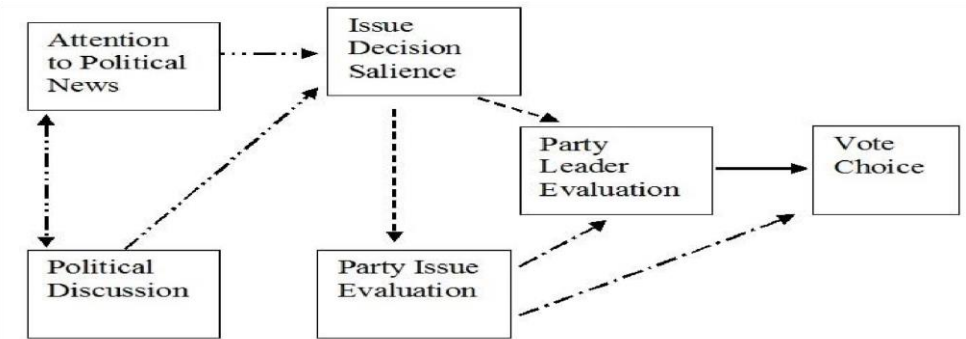
Recent research on issue ownership theory suggests that media coverage can directly affect issue ownership evaluations (Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014; Theriault, 2009). However, most past empirical work (e.g., Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Lanz, 2012) implies that media influence occurs via issue salience, leading to its inclusion in our model. Tracking this indirect influence is crucial to examining the associative dynamics of issue ownership (Walgrave et al. 2012), a focus that motivates the use of issue decision salience in the present study. As described in agenda-setting research and priming, active news attention and political discussion might explain the straightforward pattern documented by Bélanger and Meguid (2008). The present study, however, considers what occurs when issue salience is high and a party’s current or recent performance on that issue is suspect. In such contexts, news attention and interpersonal political communication might erode a party’s reputation for issue competence, as voters take in critical news coverage and try out revised opinions of a party or candidate to prompt feedback in conversations.

Based on the theorizing above, Figure 1 presents a theoretical integration of agenda-setting, priming, and issue-ownership theory, using vote choice as the final outcome. The circumstances of the 2006 Swedish elections are the focus of our exploration of whether agenda setting and priming could add to scholars’ understanding of individual-level processes at play when perceptions of issue ownership might be in flux.

Original Article

Unemployment and the 2006 Swedish Elections

Sweden is a democracy with proportional elections and, at the time of the 2006 election, seven parties in parliament. The Left Party, Green Party, and Social Democrats form the left bloc, while the Centre Party, Liberal Party, Christian Democrats, and Moderate Party make up the right bloc. The Social Democrats are the largest party. Until the 2006 election they had formed the government alone or in coalition since the 1930s, except during the years from 1976 to 1982 and 1991 to 1994. Thus, the Social Democrats have often been perceived as the governing party. Minority governments are the rule, and majority governments are the exception. The Moderate Party is the largest party in the right bloc.



Agenda setting: ————— Priming: - - - - - Issue ownership: - -

Figure 1. Integration of agenda setting, priming, and dynamic issue ownership.

Like social democratic parties in other countries, the Social Democrats are usually perceived as owning issues related to the welfare state and policies about protecting or expanding it (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). This includes the issue of fighting unemployment, as a longitudinal study by Martinsson (2009) showed. Investigating the period from 1982 to 2002, he concluded that “the Social Democrats have clearly had issue ownership of the unemployment issue,” although “the strength of this ownership has varied substantially over time” (p. 145).

Table 1 reports percentages of respondents mentioning unemployment as an issue emphasized by the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party during the eight national elections leading up to 2006. Although the share of voters associating unemployment with these two largest parties has fluctuated over the years, the Social Democrats obviously had an advantage in terms of associative issue ownership—until the 2006 election, which the party lost (Martinsson, 2009). Our chief interest is how issue decision salience affects competence issue ownership, but it is also worth noting that the data in Table 1 suggest that the Moderate Party saw an advantage in emphasizing an issue traditionally owned by the Social Democrats in both respects, associative and competence.

Table 1. Perceptions of Party Emphasis on Unemployment in Sweden, 1982–2006 (Percentages).

	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006
Social Democrats	51	30	15	43	70	31	11	24
Moderate Party		8	2	1	6	24	20	1
							51	

Source: Regeringsskifte. Väljarna och valet 2006, by H. Oscarsson and S. Holmberg, 2008, and Economic Voting and Issue Ownership: An Integrative Approach, by J. Martinsson, 2009. “In this year’s election the parties

Original Article

emphasized different issues that they found important. Can you say which issues [party name] emphasized in this year's election?" Although this question measures perceived issue emphasis rather than perceived issue ownership, the two are related conceptually and party emphasis has often been used as a measure of issue ownership (Martinsson, 2009; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008).

Six weeks before the election, Sweden's largest newspaper published a survey about what people considered the most important issues (Brors, 2006). Respondents could mention up to three issues. Unemployment and health care, each mentioned by 29% of surveyed voters, were the top two issues, followed by education and childcare. Consequently, the top issues were concerns traditionally owned by the Social Democrats. Those issues, and particularly unemployment, also topped the media agenda during the campaign (Asp, 2006; Shehata, 2010). In the eight largest national media outlets, the top issues were unemployment, taxes, and childcare, accounting for 17%, 13%, and 9% of news stories respectively (Asp, 2006).

It is important to note here that the openly unemployed accounted for only 4% of the work force at the time, and that unemployment actually was declining, although not dramatically. The Social Democrats argued that unemployment was not a major problem and sought to make the election campaign about issues such as education and health care (Asp, 2006). The opposition asserted, however, that the actual level of unemployment was more than twice as high. In its account, those participating in government-run programs for the unemployed, people who were studying or retired because they could not find a job, and people on long-term sick leave should be counted as unemployed. So although both blocs talked about unemployment, they framed the issue and scope of the problem differently. In the end the Social Democrats had to address unemployment, as attested by the fact that it was discussed in 19 percent of the party's media appearances. Also relevant in this context is that the Social Democrats received rather unfavorable media coverage during the campaign, and that their then party leader Göran Persson received the most unfavorable media coverage of all party leaders (Asp, 2006; Strömbäck, 2009).

Hypotheses

In agenda-setting research, where the independent variable is media content, it is logical—although not unproblematic, as discussed above—to use MIP questions as the dependent variable with respect to the public agenda, as these allow for comparison of issues' rank-order on the media and public agendas. Content-based agenda-setting studies are limited, however, as they do not incorporate multiple predictor variables at the individual level (Kiousis, 2004; Kiousis & McDevitt, 2008; McCombs, 2014; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2010). Attention-based agenda-setting research is an important complement, as it allows for a more precise measurement of *issue decision salience* compared to MIP questions.

Based on previous research on agenda setting, we expected that attention to political news and the frequency of political discussion would predict issue decision salience (Figure 1). We chose to measure attention to political news rather than exposure to different individual media, based on the rationale that mere exposure overestimates the effects of newspapers and underestimates the effects of television (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986), that unemployment was the most important issue across different media (Asp, 2006), and that increasing fragmentation of media consumption has made exposure to individual media increasingly difficult to measure reliably. Also, anticipation of issue ownership shifting from stable to dynamic requires active political cognition at the individual level to overcome a party's reputational inertia. Though the processes of agenda setting and priming frequently lead to a stable issue-ownership environment, the shifts in public opinion highlighted earlier suggest that media coverage patterns produced instability in the 2006 Swedish elections.

Interpersonal political communication provides individuals with another mechanism to weigh the relevance of issues for voting, although we expected discussion itself to be enhanced by attention to political news, a dynamic documented in the empirical modeling of deliberative learning during campaigns (McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006). Political discussion causes individuals to anticipate future conversations and value more highly the cognitive resources available from news content (Kiousis & McDevitt, 2008), thus elevating the social utility of news

Original Article

attention. We consequently expected a reciprocal relationship between news attention and discussion in the Swedish sample.

Political discussion is inherently an evaluative experience, and in such interactions, issues emphasized by media and political actors are likely to be accessible as a basis for judgments. Consequently, political discussion might be viewed as a bridge between associative and competence perceptions in issue ownership when participants make linkages between salient issues and evaluations of parties. For campaigns in which issue salience is prominent and party performance under scrutiny, interpersonal communication offers opportunities to make sense of performance evaluations at odds with reputational competence.

The act of voting is less immediately relational than interpersonal communication, of course, and the role of discussion is relatively unexplored in the issue ownership literature (but see Kleinnijenhuis & Walter, 2014). Still, the premise that discussion can engender issue decision salience for voting is supported by a recent study on sources of issue ownership. Stubager and Slothuus (2013) documented how partisanship, attitudes, real-world developments, and constituency-based ownership contributed to Danish voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership in 2007/2008. These types of factors can likewise motivate and guide the interpersonal communication that precedes voting.

In adopting the framework of attention-based agenda setting, we proposed the following:

H1: Attention to political news will be reciprocally related to political discussion.

H2: Attention to political news will positively predict issue decision salience for voting.

H3: Political discussion will positively predict issue decision salience for voting.

Agenda setting and priming, as well as issue-ownership theory, would predict that the salience of unemployment should impact evaluative perceptions of the party owning the issue and, by extension, vote choice. However, agenda setting and priming on the one hand, and durable issue ownership on the other, led to distinct expectations regarding whether the Social Democrats in the context of the 2006 Swedish election should have benefited from unemployment's prominence on both the public agenda before the election and the media agenda during the campaign.

From a holistic perspective, the theoretical integration depicted in Figure 1 applies to campaign situations that signal dynamic issue ownership. If active and critical cognition structured by agenda setting and priming were relatively inconsequential at the individual level, then a more traditional model of durable issue ownership would apply. In that condition, analysis would be confined to party issue evaluation's direct influence on vote choice and its indirect influence as mediated by party leader evaluation. The electoral backdrop observed here, though, requires a more elaborate explanation. The Swedish National Election Studies suggest that increased salience of unemployment negatively influenced people's perceptions of the Social Democrats' handling of this issue (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). As the party leader might function as a stand-in for people's perceptions and evaluations of a party, priming research suggests that increased salience of unemployment negatively impacted people's evaluation of the party leader (Shah & Wackman, 1998). Conversely, evaluation of a party should carry over to assessment of the candidate. Extensive research on political cognition has concluded that media consumers often rely on party allegiance as a heuristic for opinion about a candidate (Rahn, 1995). Hence, our next hypotheses are:

H4: Issue decision salience of unemployment will predict critical assessment of the Social Democrats' handling of this issue.

H5: Issue decision salience of unemployment will predict critical assessment of the Social Democrats' party leader.

Although there are many mechanisms by which media coverage can influence competence issue ownership, issue decision salience is the linchpin connecting agenda setting and priming with issue ownership as an explanation for vote choice. On the aggregate level, research suggests a correlation between issue ownership and voting

Original Article

(Budge & Farlie, 1983), but whether voting is affected by issue salience and perceived issue ownership on the individual level has not been thoroughly examined (but see Martinsson, 2009; van der Brug, 2004). In research supporting our integrative model, Druckman (2004, p. 589) found that voters who followed the campaigning for a U.S. Senate election were significantly more likely to base their votes on the issues that were most prominent in media coverage. Similarly, Bélanger and Meguid (2008, p. 485) showed that in Canada, “the influence of party ownership on vote choice is conditioned by the salience of the issue in question.

These studies suggest an influence of issue decision salience on voting mediated by party issue evaluation and candidate evaluation. We recognize that prior studies have modeled impact of issue ownership as moderated by issue salience, rather than a mediation process (e.g., Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). We think it makes sense, though, to expect that cognitive processes connected to issue decision salience would require some crystallization prior to being used in assessment of parties and candidates as a basis for vote choice. Particularly in volatile campaigns, when competence of issue handling is no longer secured by reputation, many voters are likely to require a focused, evaluative basis for decision making prior to rendering judgment. Hence, our final hypotheses are:

H6: The impact of issue decision salience of unemployment on voting for the Social Democrats will be mediated by evaluation of the party's handling of this issue.

H7: The impact of issue decision salience of unemployment on voting for the Social Democrats will be mediated by evaluation of the party's leader.

Methods

The present analysis builds on a three-wave panel study carried out by the Centre for Political Communication at Mid Sweden University, in cooperation with the polling firm IFS AB. The election was held on September 17, 2006, and the final phase of the campaign started in mid-August. The first wave of the study was conducted from August 7 to August 18, the second from August 28 to September 15, and the third from September 18 to September 27. Those who were interviewed early in the first wave were reinterviewed early in the second and third waves, those who were interviewed late in the first wave were reinterviewed late in the second and third waves, and so on. The time span between interviews in two successive waves was thus about three weeks.

IFS collected all the data through computer-assisted telephone interviews with a random sample of Swedish adults aged 18–74. Each potential respondent was called up to six times before being replaced by another respondent. Only 13% declined to participate when called in the first wave, so the initial response rate was 87%. The first wave included 2,161 respondents, the second wave 1,154, and the final wave 1,007. Thus, approximately 47% of the original sample participated in all three waves.

The major benefit of panel studies is that they simultaneously allow for both analysis of changes at the individual level and testing of longitudinal relationships with a control for the time-order. Here our focus is on relationships among variables, so demographic correspondence with a population is not as crucial as in descriptive studies. Still, the final sample ($N = 1,007$) in the panel study was broadly representative of Swedish adults in terms of gender, age, and education. Overall, 57% were male and 43% female; 22.4% had primary school education, while 39.7% and 37.6% had high school and university education, respectively. As for age, approximately 3.4% were 18–25, 12.1% were 26–35,

14.9% were 36–45, 15.1% were 46–55, 25.2% were 56–65, and 29.3% were 66–74 years old.

The analyses focused only on those who participated in all three waves and, in some cases, only those who mentioned unemployment as the most important issue ($n = 472$). It concentrated on those mentioning unemployment as the most important issue because (a) this was the major issue in this election, (b) which should have been advantageous to one party (the Social Democrats), (c) which nevertheless lost. As depicted in Figure 1, the linking of agenda-setting and priming elements with issue ownership hinges on a conceptualization of salience with respect to a particular issue. Meanwhile, the party's defeat—despite the prominence of unemployment as a campaign topic—acts as a heuristic for anticipating how agenda setting and priming might

Original Article

diverge from durable issue ownership in predicting vote choice. In other words, our theorizing and hypotheses testing rest largely on the assumption that respondents viewed unemployment as the most important issue.

Measures

The first wave of the study assessed basic demographic variables, whereas the second wave measured news media attention and political discussion to provide variance in campaign stimulation. All other variables were measured in the third wave to explore the predicted conceptual sequence of outcomes ultimately resulting in vote choice.

Attention to political news. This was measured by the question “Generally speaking, to what extent do you follow the news about politics?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). News attention and political discussion are specified as reciprocally related in H1 and as independent variables for addressing H2 and H3.

Political discussion. “Generally speaking, how often do you talk about politics with friends and family?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*).

Most important issue. “What is the most important issue facing Sweden today?” The question was open-ended, although responses were matched to a list of 25 issues. Respondents were allowed to mention one issue.

Issue decision salience. As a follow-up to the most important issue question, respondents were asked: “How important is that issue for your voting decision?” The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). We specify issue decision salience as a dependent variable when investigating H2 and H3 and as an independent variable for H4 and H5.

Party issue evaluation. As a second follow-up to the most important issue question, respondents were asked: “How do you think the Social Democrats have handled that issue?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*very badly*) to 5 (*very well*). Party issue evaluation was used as a dependent variable for H4 and as mediating variable for H6.

Party leader evaluation. To evaluate prominent party leaders—including Göran Persson, then the prime minister and head of the Social Democrats—we asked respondents: “What is your overall opinion of the following party leaders?” The response scale ranged from 1 (*very negative*) to 5 (*very positive*). Evaluation of Persson served as a dependent variable for H5 and as a mediating variable for H7.

Vote choice. In the final wave, conducted after Election Day, respondents were asked: “Which party did you vote for in the parliamentary election?” Wave 3 responses regarding voting for the Social Democrats were used as a dependent variable when investigating H6 and H7.

Data Analysis Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS software was employed to test the relationships proposed in H2–H7. In comparison to other multivariate approaches, SEM affords the advantages of testing the hypothesized relationships in a given model while simultaneously controlling for all other relationships, as well as testing for direct and indirect effects (Byrne, 2001). The maximum likelihood estimation procedure was used to specify the path model (Bollen, 1989). Model fit was judged by the χ^2 , CFI (comparative fit index), and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) indices. Nonsignificant χ^2 values usually indicate a good fit (Bentler, 1990). CFI values should exceed .90, and RMSEA values should be less than .05 to reveal a good model fit (Bentler, 1990; Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Prior to conducting the path analysis, a series of multiple regressions were run to locate relevant demographic control variables that should be included in the model and to test the first three hypotheses. Demographics included gender, education level, and age. The preliminary regressions revealed that gender and age had little influence on the proposed model, so only the variable of education was incorporated into the SEM analysis. Table 2 reports the descriptive statistics for all continuous variables included in the investigation. For the two categorical variables of education and gender, the frequencies break down as follows: Gender = male (574, 57%), female (433, 43%); Education = primary school (227,

Original Article

22.4%), high school (400, 39.7%), and university (379, 37.6%).

Table 2. Variable Means and Standard Deviation.

Variable	Range	M	SD
Age	56	19.50	13.96
News Media Attention	5	3.46	1.04
Political Discussion	5	2.81	1.07
Issue Decision Salience	5	3.86	1.00
Party Issue Evaluation	5	2.20	.96
Candidate Evaluation	5	2.61	1.03
Vote Choice (Social Democrats)	2	1.33	.47

Results

Because the proposed model did not fit the data well, a final model was developed by analyzing the modification indices and the overall model (Bollen, 1989). Using a model generating approach, the final model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 10.71$, $df = 8$, ns ; RMSEA = .02; CFI = .99). To produce the final model, the elimination and addition of relationships were required to be both conceptually and statistically grounded. For ease of presentation, the path diagram (Figure 2) does not depict relationships with education, although it is accounted for in the model.

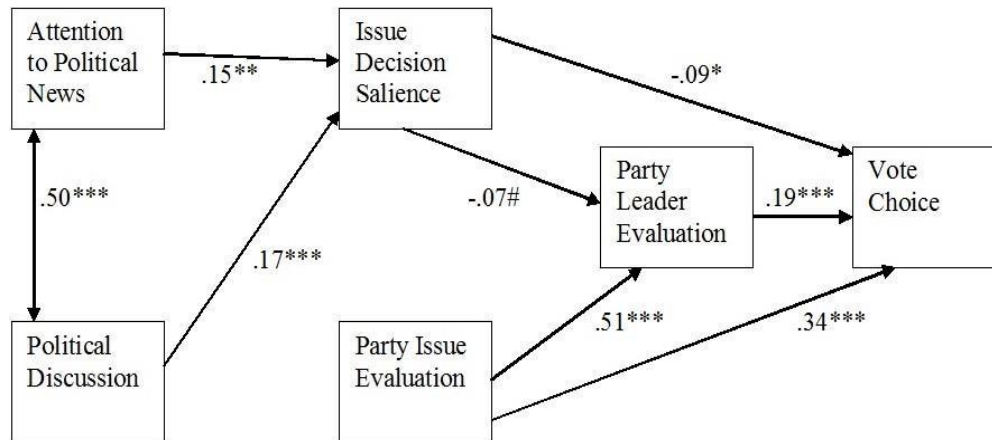


Figure 2. Impact of agenda setting, priming, and dynamic issue ownership on voting during the 2006 Swedish national elections. Note: # $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .001$**

H1 predicted a reciprocal relationship between news attention and discussion. The data strongly supported this hypothesis ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$). This is consistent with research suggesting the mutually reinforcing roles of news attention and discussion in campaign engagement and subsequent voter decision-making (e.g., Kioussis & McDevitt, 2008).

H2 and H3 expected that news attention and discussion would positively impact the issue decision salience of unemployment for voting. As shown in Figure 2, the data supported the hypotheses for mass ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$) and interpersonal communication ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$), even when controlling for all other relationships in the model. In other words, the more the respondents paid attention to political news and the more they engaged in political discussions, the more important they perceived the issue of unemployment to be for their vote choice.

H4 and H5 expected that issue decision salience would predict a critical evaluation of how the Social Democrats handled unemployment and a more global, critical assessment of the Social Democrats' party leader. Surprisingly, the data did not support H4 but did provide modest support for H5 ($\beta = -.07$, $p < .10$). Our evidence for dynamic issue ownership thus appears to apply to the party leader but not the party.

Original Article

H6 and H7 forecast that the influence of unemployment decision salience on voting for the Social Democrats would be mediated through evaluations of the party and party leader respectively. Given that unemployment decision salience failed to directly affect party issue evaluation, the findings did not support H6. However, the results provided modest support for H7 concerning an indirect relationship between issue decision salience and voting via evaluations of the party leader ($\beta = -.01, p < .05$).

An unexpected direct and negative relationship emerged between issue decision salience and vote choice ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$). One possible explanation is that increased issue decision salience indicated an anti-incumbent perception among Swedish voters. Also deserving attention is the strong direct relationship between party issue evaluation and voting for the Social Democrats. Thus, apart from whether respondents stated that unemployment was important for their vote choice, how they evaluated the party's handling of this issue had an impact on vote choice.

Discussion

Bélanger and Meguid's (2008) conditional model of issue ownership represents an important contribution to the explication of how voters respond to issue climates as they arise out of party strategy, candidate competition, and real-world events. A party's reputation for issue handling influences vote decision, but *only* if the issue in question is salient. Prior research, however, has often viewed issue salience at the macro level of party and candidate campaign strategy, or at the voter aggregate level using MIP questions. The present study fleshes out the conditional model by applying an elaborated version of agenda setting and priming, whereby interpersonal communication and news media attention contribute to issue decision salience, candidate and party evaluation, and vote choice.

These linkages offer a more systemic perspective on situations where issue ownership is "leased" to another party or issue ownership is dynamic rather than stable. We do not know whether the patterns observed here would hold for stabler issues. We thus suggest future research to examine our model with other types of issues in other historical contexts and electoral settings to see if the results found here are consistent. For example, we would expect agenda setting and priming to be more consequential in vote choice for performance rather than constituency-based issues.

We tested a model of dynamic issue ownership with a sample of people who voted in the 2006 Swedish election. Use of panel data afforded us some traction for a degree of theoretical refinement not possible in aggregate voter studies or cross-sectional descriptions of individual voters. Specifically, we found that discussion and attention to news media contributed to the salience of unemployment in voter decision-making. These findings, though hardly startling in themselves, helped us highlight the added value that agenda setting and priming bring to issue-ownership theory. Nonetheless, our sample was limited to respondents naming unemployment as the most important issue. This choice was consistent with our theorizing regarding high-salience issues, but future scholarship should consider issues with varying degrees of public salience.

The conditional model of issue ownership illuminates the importance of issue salience in vote choice, but it does not adequately address the origins of this perceptual orientation in terms of individual behavior. Granted, the conditional model bridges the activities of parties and candidates at the macro level of campaign dynamics with voter-level cognition and behavior. However, it says nothing about the crucial role of media in shaping what issues are perceived as most important. Bélanger and Meguid's (2008) refinement of issue ownership also fails to incorporate interpersonal political communication, a significant omission given the demonstrated connections among discussion, political cognition, and voting in classic formulations such as the two-step flow and in contemporary perspectives such as deliberative theory and social network analysis.

In the next phase of our sequential model, we expected that the issue decision salience of unemployment for voting would impact assessments of how the Social Democrats were handling this issue and of their party leader more generally. Unemployment is traditionally "owned" by the Social Democrats in Sweden (Martinsson, 2009;

Original Article

Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008), but as Petrocik (1996) explained, ownership depends on party performance. Why, then, was there a lack of a relationship between issue decision salience and perception of party issue handling in the election examined here (Figure 2)?

Multiple explanations appear plausible. First, even many Social Democrats criticized the leadership of the party for not highlighting unemployment more. Thus, many citizens might have assigned blame for the problem not to the party itself but to the leadership of the then party leader. Research has also shown that the party leader of the Social Democrats received the most unfavorable media coverage of all party leaders (Asp, 2006). This might explain the negative relationship between the salience of unemployment and evaluation of the Social Democrats' party leader. Second, the Social Democrats' reputation for competence vis-à-vis unemployment may have persisted somewhat, despite taking a dent in 2006. Had the opposition parties not succeeded in mounting criticism of the Social Democrats' recent performance, we would expect a positive and significant relationship between issue salience for voting and party issue evaluations. Perhaps the lack of a significant relationship—positive or negative—implies that the party's lingering issue reputation (+) and perceptions of its recent performance or the then-party leader (–) cancelled each other out. Finally, this lack of a relationship might be explained by the extensive literature highlighting the personalization of political communication and media coverage (e.g., Karvonen, 2010; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011). That is, public opinion based on media coverage and political communication tends to be tied to individuals rather than parties due to its focus on individuals, leaders, and personal narratives.

Issue decision salience did negatively influence both party leader evaluation and vote choice. The significant effect on party leader evaluation, juxtaposed against the non-finding for party issue evaluation, makes intuitive sense in terms of issue-ownership theory and the contextual factors at play during the campaign. A party's issue-handling reputation should entail some inertia despite public opinion turbulence. A major party constitutes an enduring institution rooted in sociological allegiances; it is somewhat fixed in the public's mind through predictable ideological battles with other parties. While a specific candidate or party leader can be viewed as representing a party's issue reputation, that person also brings an array of idiosyncratic strengths and liabilities that may or may not take on a life of their own during a campaign. Meanwhile, the negative connection of issue salience with party leader evaluation opens up the possibility of party leader or candidate evaluation mediating the impact of issue salience on vote choice. The data supported (albeit only marginally) our expectation of an indirect relationship between issue decision salience and vote choice.

Our analysis did not examine the impact of framing mechanisms within the political communication environment of the election. Because prior research has indicated that framing can impact issue ownership processes, we suggest it be incorporated in future research for explaining some of the negative linkages observed in the current study (Aalberg & Jenssen, 2007; De Bruycker & Walgrave, 2013; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006).

We believe these results hint at the value of applying an elaborated version of the agenda-setting model to issue ownership. In a refinement that builds upon, but also goes beyond, the conditional model proposed by Bélanger and Meguid (2008), the agenda setting-priming-voting sequence provides a more explicit framework for issue-ownership theory. The sequential dynamics illustrated in Figure 1 also offer useful insights to scholars who have sought to extend agenda setting into the realm of political behavior. For example, Kioussis and McDevitt (2008) showed how agenda setting constitutes a core, intrinsic process in the political socialization of young adults. The model successfully predicted a sequence in which news media attention and discussion resulted in perceived issue importance, opinion strength, crystallization of political ideology, and finally voter *turnout*. However, the agenda-setting-to-voting dynamic revealed in that study was not capable of predicting vote *choice*. The application of issue-ownership theory to the agenda-setting-to-voting sequence amends the model to allow for an explanation of voter decisionmaking.

Original Article

Despite these insights, the present study was limited by its empirical modeling of only a single election in one country. In addition, measures available in the panel data did not control for many sociodemographic and dispositional determinants that might be linked to vote choice, such as partisanship and political involvement. We recommend that future research also include voter evaluations of a party's long-standing reputation for issue handling as well as evaluations of the party's and party leaders' current handling of the same issue. Agenda-setting and priming processes, as depicted in Figure 1, would presumably influence the latter more than the former.

We decided to retain only respondents who named unemployment as the most important issue in order to control for the type of issue when interpreting the paths depicted in Figure 2. Our intent was to examine the strength of relationships, and whether coefficients were positive or negative, with only one issue in mind, enabling, for example, the teasing out of various rationales for why issue decision salience would be a strong predictor of vote choice for issue X but not for issue Y. We recommend, of course, that future studies observe various types of issues to assess the generalizability of an integrated model.

As a guide for future research, we conclude with a typology for anticipating when issue decision salience (IDS) is likely to be maximally consequential in issue-based voting. We would expect campaigns to be consequential—leading to change in governance—primarily in cases where recent incumbent performance on an issue is questionable and issue handling becomes highly salient. Figure 3 generates hypotheses based on a crossing of issue salience (low/high) with perceived incumbent performance (successful/unsuccessful).

Perceived Incumbent Performance

Issue Salience Successful Unsuccessful

IDS not relevant:

Low

IDS not relevant: Factors other than issue

Incumbent victory. ownership impact election.

IDS contributes to retention of IDS most consequential:

High issue ownership: Possibility for challenger Incumbent victory. victory.

Figure 3. Relevance of issue decision salience by campaign context.

When issue salience is low, a party's prior reputation should ensure durable issue ownership, leading to predictions of incumbent victory regardless of whether marginal performance on that issue was successful. (In cases of dramatic success or failure, issue salience would likely be high, in which case the lower tier in Figure 3 would apply.) When salience is high, a shift from durable to dynamic issue ownership becomes possible, particularly when incumbent issue performance is suspect.

As noted earlier, a comprehensive synthesis of agenda setting and priming with issue ownership would require a program of research across multiple election cycles in various nations, with an accounting for sequence dynamics across multiple types of issues. The present study nonetheless helps to emphasize the role of agenda setting and priming in influencing issue ownership and ultimately voting, and will hopefully motivate further exploration of conditions in which agenda setting and priming matter in shaping issue ownership and vote choice.

References

Aalberg, T., & Jenssen, A. T. (2007). Do television debates in multiparty systems affect viewers? A quasiexperimental study with first-time voters. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30(1), 115–135.

Original Article

- Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (1994). Riding the wave and claiming ownership over issues: The joint effects of advertising and news coverage in campaigns. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 58(3), 335–357.
- Asp, K. (2006). *Rättvisa nyhetsmedier. Partiskheten under 2006 års medievalsval* [Fair and balanced news media: Partisan bias in the media coverage of the 2006 election]. Göteborg: JMG/Göteborgs universitet.
- Banda, K. K. (2014). Issue-based negativity and candidate assessment. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 78(3), 707–720. doi:10.1093/poq/nfu038
- Bélanger, É., & Meguid, B. (2008). Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice. *Electoral Studies*, 27, 477–491.
- Belluci, P. (2006). Tracing the cognitive and affective roots of “party competence”: Italy and Britain, 2001. *Electoral Studies*, 25(3), 548–569.
- Bentler, P. M. (1990). Comparative fit indexes in structural models. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107(2), 238–246.
- Bollen, K. A. (1989). *Structural equations with latent variables*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brors, H. (2006, July 1). Sjukvården viktigaste valfrågan [Healthcare the most important election issue]. *Dagens Nyheter*, p. A8.
- Browne, M. W., & Cudeck, R. (1993). Alternative ways of assessing model fit. In K. A. Bollen & J. S. Long (Eds.), *Testing structural equation models* (pp. 136–162). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Budge, I., & Farlie, D. (1983). *Explaining and predicting elections: Issue effects and party strategies in twenty-three democracies*. London, UK: George Allen & Unwin.
- Byrne, B. M. (2001). *Structural equation modeling with AMOS: Basic concepts, applications, and programming* (Multivariate Applications Series). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Chaffee, S. H., & Schleuder, J. (1986). Measurement and effects of attention to media news. *Human Communication Research*, 13(1), 76–107.
- Damore, D. F. (2005). Issue convergence in presidential campaigns. *Political Behavior*, 27(1), 71–97.
- De Bruycker, I., & Walgrave, S. (2013). How a new issue becomes an owned issue: Media coverage of the financial crisis in Belgium (2008–2009). *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26(1), 86–97.
- Domke, D., Shah, D. V., & Wackman, D. B. (1998). Media priming effects: Accessibility, association, and activation. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 10(1), 51–74.
- Druckman, J. N. (2004). Priming the vote: Campaign effects in a U.S. Senate election. *Political Psychology*, 25(4), 577–594.

Original Article

- Green, J., & Hobolt, S. B. (2008). Owning the issue agenda: Party strategies and vote choices in British elections. *Electoral Studies*, 27(3), 460–476.
- Holian, D. B. (2004). He's stealing my issues! Clinton's crime rhetoric and the dynamics of issue ownership. *Political Behavior*, 26(2), 95–124.
- Iyengar, P. S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News that matters: Television and American opinion*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Karvonen L. (2010). *The personalization of politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. Colchester, UK: ECPR Press.
- Kiousis, S., & McCombs, M. (2004). Agenda-setting effects and attitude strength political figures during the 1996 presidential election. *Communication Research*, 31(1), 36–57.
- Kiousis, S., & McDevitt, M. (2008). Agenda setting in civic development: Effects of curricula and issue importance on youth voter turnout. *Communication Research*, 35(4), 481–502.
- Kleinnijenhuis, J., & Walter, A. S. (2014). News, discussion, and associative issue ownership: Instability at the micro level versus stability at the macro level. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19(2), 226–245.
- Lanz, S. (2012). The importance of salience: Agenda-setting and issue voting in Swiss politics. *University of Geneva, Department of Political Science and International Relations*, 4.
- Martinsson, J. (2009). Economic voting and issue ownership: An integrative approach (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). *University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg*.
- McCombs, M. (2014). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- McDevitt, M., & Kiousis, S. (2006). Deliberative learning: An evaluative approach to interactive civic education. *Communication Education*, 55(3), 247–264.
- Meijer, M.-M., & Kleinnijenhuis, J. (2006). Issue news and corporate reputation: Applying the theories of agenda setting and issue ownership in the field of business communication. *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 543–559.
- Mendelsohn, M. (1996). The media and interpersonal communications: The priming of issues, leaders, and party identification. *The Journal of Politics*, 58(1), 112–125.
- Oscarsson, H., & Holmberg, S. (2008). *Regeringsskifte. Väljarna och valet 2006* [Change of government. The electorate and the 2006 election]. Stockholm, Sweden: Norstedts Juridik.
- Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 825–850.

Original Article

- Rahn, W. (1995). Candidate evaluation in complex information environments: Cognitive organization and comparison process. In M. Lodge & K. McGraw (Eds.), *Political judgment: Structure and process*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Petrocik, J., Benoit, W., & Hansen, G. (2003). Issue ownership and presidential campaigning, 1952–2000. *Political Science Quarterly*, 118(3), 599–626.
- Roskos-Ewoldsen, D. R., & Roskos-Ewoldsen, B. (2009). Current research in media priming. In R. L. Nabi & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of media processes and effects* (pp. 177–192). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Shaw, D., & McCombs, M. (1977). *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing.
- Shehata, A. (2010). Unemployment on the agenda: A panel study of agenda-setting effects during the 2006 Swedish national election campaign. *Journal of Communication*, 60(1), 182–203.
- Shoemaker, P. J., Eichholz, M., Kim, E., & Wrigley, B. (2001). Individual and routine forces in gatekeeping. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 233–246.
- Sides, J. (2006). The origins of campaign agendas. *British Journal of Political Science*, 36(03), 407–436.
- Strömbäck, J. (2009). *Den medialiserade valbevakningen* [The mediatized election news coverage]. In L. Nord & J. Strömbäck (Eds.), *Väljarna, partierna och medierna. En studie av politisk kommunikation i valrörelsen 2006* [Voters, parties and the media: A study of political communication in the 2006 election] (pp. 127–167). Stockholm, Sweden: SNS förlag.
- Strömbäck, J., & Kioussis, S. (2010). A new look at agenda-setting effects: Comparing the predictive power of overall political news consumption and specific news media consumption across different media channels and media types. *Journal of Communication*, 60(2), 271–292.
- Strömbäck, J., & Kioussis, S. (Eds.). (2011). *Political public relations: Principles and applications*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stubager, R., & Slothuus, R. (2013). What are the sources of political parties' issue ownership? Testing four explanations at the individual level. *Political Behavior*, 35(2), 567–588.
- Therriault, A. (2009). Issue ownership, party reputations, and policy positions. *Unpublished manuscript*. New York University, New York, NY.
- Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2011). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of key concepts, operationalizations, and findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203–220.
- Van der Brug, W. (2004). Issue ownership and party choice. *Electoral Studies*, 23(2), 209–233.

Original Article

- Walgrave, S., & De Swert, K. (2007). Where does issue ownership come from? From the party or from the media? Issue-party identifications in Belgium, 1991–2005. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 12(1), 37–67.
- Walgrave, S., Lefevere, J., & Tresch, A. (2012). The associative dimension of issue ownership. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76(4), 771–782.
- Walgrave, S., Soroka, S., & Nuytemans, M. (2008). The mass media's political agenda-setting power: A longitudinal analysis of media, parliament, and government in Belgium (1993 to 2000). *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(6), 814–836.
- Wanta, W. (1997). *The public and the national agenda: How people learn about important issues*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wanta, W., & Ghanem, S. (2007). Effects of agenda setting. In R. W. Preiss, B. M. Gayle, N. Burrell, M. Allen, & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Mass media effects research: Advances through meta-analysis* (pp. 37–51). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wlezien, C. (2005). On the salience of political issues: The problem with “most important problem.” *Electoral Studies*, 24(4), 555–579.
- Yang, J., & Stone, G. (2003). The powerful role of interpersonal communication in agenda setting. *Mass Communication & Society*, 6(1), 57–74.
- Yeon, H. M., Choi, Y., & Kioussis, S. (2007). Interactive communication features on nonprofit organizations' webpages for the practice of excellence in public relations. *Journal of Website Promotion*, 1(4), 61–83.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.