



Measuring issue ownership with survey questions. A question wording experiment



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 July 2015

Received in revised form

1 December 2015

Accepted 1 December 2015

Available online 15 December 2015

Keywords:

Issue ownership

Question wording

Survey experiment

ABSTRACT

Issue ownership, which has a competence and an associative dimension, refers to the link between issues and parties in voters' minds. Although used frequently in voting research, there remain worries about the validity of its current measures. The measures may be confounded with respondents' (dis)agreement with parties' position and general party evaluations. Through a question wording experiment we compare measures of both issue ownership types and test which are most affected by the two confounding factors. We find that competence issue ownership measures are heavily affected by confounding factors while associative issue ownership wordings are less. Challenging existing research, we find that especially the classic 'best at handling'-wording tapping competence issue ownership is most conflated with positions and party preference.

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1. Introduction

Students of voters have been increasingly drawing on the concept of issue ownership – the link between parties and issues in voters' minds. Budge and Farlie (1983) were the first to use the term issue ownership in a study on mostly European countries not relying on survey measures, later it was applied to the U.S. by Petrocik (1996, 1989) who did employ survey measures. Issue ownership measures have been intermittently included in the American National Election Study since 1994 as well as in numerous national election studies in Western Europe (Seeberg, 2014). Additionally, issue ownership questions have been asked in a host of other voter surveys since 1970. Just dealing with studies relying on random population samples, Egan (2013, p. 62) recently listed no less than 6101 distinct issue ownership questions fielded in voter surveys in the U.S. (1970–2011). Despite this long track record, academic work on issue ownership only really boomed during the last five years. Using Web of Science (accessed July 2015) the 'issue ownership' search term produced a total of 248 hits over the past 25 years (1990–2014). Of these 248 papers, 24 were

published in the 1990s and 94 in the 2000s. The remaining 130 publications have been published in a timespan of only five years (2010–2014). Thus, work drawing on issue ownership has almost tripled the last years, after quadrupling the decade before.

Issue ownership has been used in party research and in voter research. This study speaks to the second strand of issue ownership studies: voting research. When voters consider a party to own an issue – both measured at the individual and at the aggregate level – and when voters consider that issue to be important, the odds of voting for that party go up. However, empirical evidence is mixed. Some studies found a direct effect of issue ownership (Green and Jennings, 2012a), others found the expected interaction effect with issue salience (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Walgrave et al., 2012; Lachat, 2014), while still others found the effect of issue ownership on the vote to be conditioned by ideology (van der Brug, 2004). It remains unclear how the effect of issue ownership on electoral choice precisely works.

These mixed results form a good reason to take a step back and to reconsider issue ownership's use in voter studies. There are several problems with issue ownership. A key problem is that issue ownership's definition is variable and not established (Walgrave et al., 2015). This study deals with another, yet related, problem: the measurement of issue ownership in surveys. Many question wordings have been used without systematic scrutiny or validation. We do not know how the different measures affect the results, and

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we do not even know what they actually gauge. This measurement opacity might contribute to the confusion about the effects of issue ownership. The most critical measurement problem is that the prevailing issue ownership measures may be endogenous. Various authors have suggested that they are confounded with party preference and positional agreement (e.g. Kuechler, 1991; van der Brug, 2004). The conflation with party preference fundamentally challenges the usefulness of issue ownership as a predictor of the vote while the mix-up with position questions the distinct contribution of issue ownership to voting on top of positional agreement.

Drawing on a large-scale question wording experiment on a sample of Belgian citizens this study tackles the measurement of issue ownership in survey questions. We compare seven measures of issue ownership and evaluate these measures using two criteria: their independence from positional agreement with the party and their independence from general party preference. We find that some issue ownership measures are heavily affected by confounding factors while other wordings are less affected. Directly challenging a host of existing research, we find that especially the classic ‘best at handling’-wording is most conflated with position and party preference.

2. Measuring issue ownership

Issue ownership refers to the link between parties and issues in the minds of voters. What this ‘link’ precisely entails, has been the object of a recent scholarly debate. Issue ownership’s founding fathers (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) mainly emphasized parties’ advantage in terms of *competence* on an issue compared to other parties. Competence issue ownership thus refers to voters’ perception of a party’s capacity to deal with an issue successfully. More recent work has conceptualized a second, *associative* dimension referring to the commitment of parties towards issues – leading to a spontaneous connection voters make between these parties and their issues (Lachat, 2014; see: van der Brug, 2004; Walgrave et al., 2012). Associative issue ownership can be defined as voters’ perception of a party’s commitment to deal with an issue. We follow this recent work here and distinguish both dimensions—competence and associative issue ownership—from one another.

The crucial thing is that issue ownership as measured in voter surveys is a *perception* of voters regarding parties. This implies that issue ownership is its measure; issue ownership only exists in the minds of voters and we can only study it by asking questions. This makes measurement a key problem. As the measure is the definition, measurement is not just a matter of operationalizing a construct but also of defining it. This is all the more the case as voters’ perceptions of parties are probably only partially related to parties’ objective behavior regarding issues but are also a matter of voters’ predispositions, beliefs and preferences regarding the parties more generally. Therefore it is useful to look at how previous studies have measured, and thus defined, issue ownership and which predispositions, beliefs and preferences these measures mobilized.

Complemented by the original Petrocik study, Table 1 presents 23 English-written recent (2004–2014) studies drawing on the issue ownership concept. All present an explicit conceptualization of issue ownership, measure the concept through survey questions, and have issue ownership as their dependent or main independent variable.

The original American National Election Study (ANES) wording reads: ‘Which political party, the Democrats or the Republicans, do you trust to do a better job handling each of the following issues?’ Petrocik’s (1996) foundational work builds on this question; it taps the competence dimension of issue ownership. Table 1 counts no

less than thirteen variations on the initial ANES question. Ranging from ‘is best placed’ over ‘have more confidence in’ to ‘has best ideas for handling’, these variations in question wording all diverge to a greater or lesser degree from the original ‘handling’ wording. While all these questions are designed to measure the same underlying construct, the ‘competence’ to deal with an issue, it remains unclear what, for example, the phrase ‘a better job handling’ exactly elicits in the minds of voters, and to what extent these are the same or different considerations than those that are triggered by, for example, ‘have more confidence in’.

Competence issue ownership measures have increasingly been complemented, in some national election studies even replaced, by questions tapping associative issue ownership – parties’ perceived commitment to an issue leading to a spontaneous identification of parties with the issue. Van Hoof et al. (2003) were the first to tap this by asking Dutch voters: ‘Which issue do you think of in the case of PARTY?’ (see also Kleinnijenhuis and Walter, 2014). Since then, van der Brug (2004), also in the Netherlands, Aalberg and Jenssen (2007) in Norway, Walgrave et al. (2012) in Belgium, Lachat (2014) in Switzerland, and Meyer and Müller (2013) in Austria all report about the use of associative issue ownership measures in national election studies. Looking at the exact question wordings in Table 1, the conclusion can only be that also the associative dimension of issue ownership has been assessed with different measures. Whereas the competence measures were very akin – sometimes only one word differed – the differences across associative wordings are more marked. The alternate wordings define the associative link between party and issue differently (‘thinking about’, ‘finding important’, ‘being most engaged’, ‘caring most’, ‘displaying most commitment’), some wordings refer to problems and others to issues, and some measures include an explicit non-positional cue.

Our short exploration made it clear that many different question wordings, all aimed at measuring issue ownership or one of its dimensions, have been used. However, we have no clue whether these questions actually measure the same underlying construct (or dimensions thereof). In other words: the validity of the measures is at least only tentative. Apart from a handful of exceptions (Therriault, 2014; Wagner and Zeglovits, 2014), few scholars have examined the validity of existing issue ownership measures.

Yet, the matter of question wordings is an important one, seeing that even a slight modification in the wording of a question—we saw that some question wordings are more than slightly different—can alter how respondents interpret it and can influence responses (Dillman et al., 2009). This is especially true for attitudinal questions. As issue ownership is an attitude, or at least a subjective perception, phrasing may steer respondents’ answers. Different question interpretations make that different bits of information are recollected and mobilized by the respondent leading to a different answer (Tourangeau, 1992; Tourangeau et al., 2000). The best question wording elicits recollection of the exact information that the researcher is interested in. In our case: the best measure of issue ownership is the one that only gauges a person’s ‘pure’ issue ownership perception without being contaminated by other considerations that are analytically different.

3. Criteria to evaluate issue ownership measures

The approach we follow here argues that a measure of a construct should not be associated strongly with measures of different constructs from which it is theoretically different. In other words, we follow a classic discriminant validity approach widely used in the social sciences and psychology (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). The best measure of issue ownership is the one that gauges only that. If correlations with adjacent constructs are

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