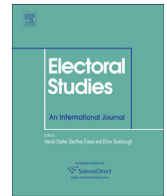




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The consequences of appearing divided: An analysis of party evaluations and vote choice



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ABSTRACT

Recent advances to the theory of issue ownership suggest that voters change their impressions of parties' competencies in response to parties' experiences in government. We add that parties' evaluations depend on their success in fostering a cohesive image by managing diverse intra-party interests. We predict that voters' impressions of parties' internal discord negatively affect their assessments of parties' policy competencies. Furthermore, voters' choice of parties will also depend on perceptions of the parties' coherence and competence. Using individual-level analysis of party evaluations in Germany, we test predictions from our theory using a new survey that contains questions on parties' policy coherence and issue competence. The results hold important implications for the study of intra-party politics, issue competition and vote choice.

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1. Introduction

Parties compete in elections by selectively promoting issues and preferences. By consistently focusing attention on certain issues, parties encourage voters to form perceptions of competence and expertise for their work on those issues. From an issue ownership perspective, parties emphasize issues that they 'own' or have a reputation for competence to attract voters (Petrocik, 1996). Scholars find increasing evidence that changes in short term perceptions of issue competence and salience play an important role in influencing how voters choose between competing parties (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Green and Hobolt, 2008; de Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Green and Jennings, 2012a, 2012b; Geys, 2012; Spoon et al., 2013; Vegetti, 2014; Wagner and Zeglovits, 2013). This research also indicates ways in which parties may not benefit from issue competition. Parties' strategies are often confounded by other parties' claims to the same issue (Geys, 2012), the need to respond to their

competitors' threats (Spoon et al., 2013), their experience in the opposition (Green and Jennings, 2012a, 2012b), the media, and intra-party divisions (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Marx and Schumacher, 2013). We add that public divisions among party leaders and representatives decrease voters' ratings of parties' policy competencies and ultimately decrease voters' support for those parties.

Despite increased scholarly attention to the determinants of the competence dimension of issue ownership (e.g. van der Brug, 2004; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Stuberger and Slothuus, 2012; Walgrave et al., 2012; Vegetti, 2014; Wagner and Zeglovits, 2013), the link between parties' behavior and voters' assessments of party competency remains unclear.¹ Party members' actions lead parties to appear divided for a number of reasons; members' personal vote seeking activities, divisions between organizational and parliamentary leaders, divisions amongst key supporters, and strategic electoral choices in which party members make statements that appear at odds with each

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¹ Note that we are largely interested in the determinants of competence based ownership in this paper.

other (Slapin and Proksch, 2010; van der Wardt, 2012; Vivyan and Wagner, 2012; Marx and Schumacher, 2013). The consequences of appearing divided are less well known.

We hope to clarify these consequences by arguing that voters' assessments of parties' internal coherence lead them to define parties' policy competencies. Perceptions of intra-party divisions play a role in the formation of voter evaluations along with the impact of historical issue competencies. Take for example the debate surrounding the introduction of a child care subsidy in Germany in 2012. The *Betreuungsgeld* would provide monthly payments to families that do not send their children to child care facilities. Chancellor Merkel proposed the subsidy as a concession to the CDU's sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). The idea faced strong criticism both from within the CDU, as 23 CDU MPs openly opposed the introduction of the law, and from the CDU's coalition partner, the FDP. The debate intensified when high-ranking CDU members such as Saarland governor Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer threatened to take the issue to a vote at the upcoming national congress. The primary opposition party, the SPD, piled on further criticism adding that its own proposals are more palatable to the public ("[Pay to Stay at Home](#)" 2012).² Given public intra-party disagreement, voters' perception of the CDU's competence and certainty over the party's preferred policy likely decreased.

We argue that public intra-party divisions fuel negative evaluations of parties' cohesiveness and that these perceptions influence elections in two ways. Voters perceive intra-party disagreement as an inability to coordinate and develop rigorous policies. Incoherent messages increase voters' uncertainty about the relative location of parties' preferences. Like Green and Jennings (2012b), we hypothesize that voters form general ratings of parties' competence. We add that voters evaluate parties' internal coherence by observing parties' public actions and then use these evaluations to rate parties' competencies. Impressions of coherence ultimately lead to respondents' vote choice.

Inadequate data has limited analyses of public opinion and issue competence. Few surveys directly ask respondents to evaluate parties' cohesiveness.³ We test predictions using data from a new survey of German voters, the 2012 German Internet Panel Survey (GIP) (Blom et al., 2013). The GIP directly solicits impressions of parties' coherence. The results indicate that respondent rankings of coherence predict parties' issue competencies. We find that ratings of party coherence more consistently predict vote intention than competence ratings alone. Voters are unwilling to support parties that they deem too divided or incoherent, regardless of the party's traditional issue ownership or competence. The findings are consistent with our proposed theoretical

approach and provide insight into the development of parties' policy competence that directly accounts for voter impressions of party actions.

The results hold important implications for democratic accountability and parties' election strategies. Democratic policy accountability requires voters to have information about parties' priorities and expertise so that they can choose to support the party that is most likely to represent their preferences. Optimistically, we find evidence that voters act as if they have information about parties' internal ability to develop their stated policy goals and use this information to evaluate parties' reputations.

In the next section, we review the concepts of issue ownership and competency. We show that parties cultivate their reputation, but that they face disincentives and limitations on their ability to establish issue ownerships. We add that perceptions of parties' internal coherence determine competence attributions because perceptions of internal cohesion reflect voters' recent perceptions of parties' ability to make clear decisions and propose coherent policies. We then describe the GIP data set and our questions of party coherence and competence. Subsequently, we show evidence that individuals have a higher likelihood of voting for more cohesive parties.

2. Issue competition and policy coherence

Parties have numerous strategies to attract voters. In addition to changing their preferences or making broad policy appeals, parties selectively focus attention on certain issues to gain a positive reputation. Parties expect electoral benefit from developing 'ownership' of issues. From the issue ownership perspective, parties generate ownership by developing a record of "attention, initiative and innovation" (Petrocik, 1996: 826) or a "track record" on that issue (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007: 37). Parties' actions in office, respondents' partisanship and respondents' attitudes towards an issue also influence a party's reputation (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004, 2007; Stubager and Slothuus, 2012). Once a party has a reputation for competence on an issue, this ownership is enduring, changing only slowly or not at all (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). Parties dedicate attention to issues that they own so that voters form a positive impression of the party (Petrocik, 1996). In turn, voters choose the party that owns their most salient issue (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). From the voters' standpoint, individuals not only consider the hypothetical benefits that they receive from voting a party into office, but also the likelihood that the party will successfully implement policies using the party's reputation.

Much of the literature on issue ownership and salience focuses on party and candidate behavior without directly measuring voter perceptions of their actions. These studies suggest that the impact of issue ownership on vote choice depends on the operationalization of ownership. Walgrave et al. (2012), for example, find that *associative issue ownership*⁴ does not have strong effect on voting behavior. van der

² The CDU also divided over pension system reforms in the fall of 2012. Labor Minister Ursula von der Leyen faced criticisms over her planned reforms to the pension system from young members of her party, as well as the junior coalition partner, the FDP, and Chancellor Merkel herself. Using platforms such as facebook and interviews with traditional media, members of the CDU and the FDP suggested other options would be "more honest" and that these reforms are outside the coalition contract (Gessat, 2012).

³ We define party cohesion as the extent to which a party's message is unified.

⁴ Associative issue ownership refers to the issues that respondents spontaneously connect to parties, but without expectations for competence.

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