

Party Reputations and Policy Priorities: How Issue Ownership Shapes Executive and Legislative Agendas*

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Abstract

Election-oriented elites are expected to give campaign emphasis to issues on which their party possesses 'issue ownership'. This paper extends those theories to the content of executive and legislative agendas. Arguing that executives have incentives to pursue their party's owned issues in the legislature, we theorize three conditions under which these incentives are constrained: when governments are responsive to issues prioritized by the public, when a party has a stronger electoral mandate, and under conditions of divided government. The theory is tested using time series analyses of policy agendas of US Statutes of Congress and the State of the Union address (1947-2012) and UK Acts of Parliament and the Queen's Speech (1950-2010). The results offer support for our theory, and they are particularly strong for the US State of the Union address, providing insights into institutional differences. The implications provide reassurance concerning the conditions under which governments focus attention only on their partisan issue priorities.

Keywords: issue ownership, saliency theory, agenda-setting, legislative priorities.

There is an extensive literature predicting the issue agendas of parties and candidates during election campaigns. Election-oriented elites attempt to emphasize issues on which their party has 'issue ownership'¹ and avoid issues on which another party has an advantage. Parties are not wholly free to achieve this 'selective emphasis'.² The issue agenda of an election campaign is a matter for competition between rivals, as well as the wider campaign context of media attention, policy events and what voters already care most about and decide upon. But insofar as a party's owned issues (the issue associations voters hold about different political parties and their reputation for trust and competence) overlap with their partisan priorities - those issues on which elites, members and activists care most about³ – a party that achieves its goal of winning office should try to pursue the party's owned issues in the legislature. A governing period is precisely the time when Petrocik⁴ expects a party to demonstrate its ownership of issues via legislative attention and commitment.

Issue ownership evaluations have been found to shape the issues focused upon in presidential rhetoric,⁵ in parliamentary debate,⁶ by individual Congressmen/women⁷ and in congressional legislative outputs.⁸ But there is much we do not know about the transmission of owned issues into legislative priorities. For one, we remain uncertain about the *extent* to which executives and political parties focus on their owned issues in legislation. Is this a small effect that can be outweighed by other factors, or does it account for a large amount of variation in executive and legislative attention? We lack information on whether there is a greater impact of

¹ Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003.

² Budge and Farlie 1977; 1983; Budge, Hearl, and Robertson 1987; Budge 1993.

³ Egan 2013.

⁴ Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003.

⁵ Holian 2004; Cummins 2010.

⁶ Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011.

⁷ Sulkin 2005; 2009.

⁸ Egan 2013.

issue ownership on executive speeches or whether issue ownership effects are equally strong in legislation, which is of course subject to the constraints of institutional competitors and legislative process. And we do not know whether these incentives are generalisable across country and institutional setting.⁹ There is also a significant theory gap relating to the conditions under which issue ownership executive and legislative incentives do not apply. After all, governing implies responsiveness to policy problems and issues of broad public concern,¹⁰ rather than to the issues that advantage one particular party. If it were not so, the broad argument that executives and legislatures are governed by their owned issues, or partisan priorities, would pose a significant challenge to a notion of political representation that denotes responsiveness beyond partisan priorities to the wider electorate.

This paper considers the effects of public opinion about party issue competence or ownership on executive and legislative agendas from a reverse perspective. We ask the question, when is it *not* possible for political elites to focus executive and legislative attention on partisan issue priorities; on a party's best-rated issues? Given what we know about countervailing legislative and executive pressures to respond to issues of public concern and to work within ever-present political and institutional constraints,¹¹ we advance a theory which incorporates competing political incentives. We reveal how the issue context and how the political and institutional context condition executive and legislative attention to policy issues on the basis of ratings of issue ownership. We extend the theory and analysis across two institutional systems - one presidential and one parliamentary (the US and the UK) and across executive and legislative

⁹ Green-Pedersen and Mortensen's (2010) study of the 'party system agenda' represents the only relevant comparative study of which we are aware. This interesting contribution reveals the relevance of issue ownership to a legislative setting in parliamentary systems (Denmark), but not to policy outputs or executive priorities directly.

¹⁰ Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jennings and John 2009; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Bevan and Jennings 2014.

¹¹ Jones 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Adler and Wilkerson 2012.

agendas. The analysis also contributes to existing research via the creation of measures of issue competence on multiple policy categories,¹² providing an assessment of ownership and/or competence effects across the policy agenda. We recognise that issue ownership comprises two components; one that relates to the idea of commitment and association, where “party constituency ownership of an issue is much more long-term (although it can change and occasionally exhibits fluctuation)”,¹³ and the other to performance or “a “lease” – short-term ownership – of a performance issue”.¹⁴ Both aspects of public opinion about party competence, or ownership, create incentives to focus on a party's 'best' issues. We measure a party's 'best' issues using a novel rank issue measure which combines long-term and relatively short-term notions of issue ratings.

The findings reveal that issue ownership is an important explanatory factor in governing policy agendas in the US and in the UK. Issue ownership is particularly influential upon the issue agenda of the US State of the Union address, and stronger in the US. While data do not exist to compare a greater number of countries, the results suggest that a focus upon greater issue control and greater partisan influence under presidentialism may be in evidence, compared to the weaker evidence in the UK parliamentary system.

Our theory of the conditionality of issue ownership effects is supported. The effects of issue competence on executive and legislative agendas are outweighed by salient policy issues, and they are also outweighed when the incumbent party is riding higher in the polls. We theorize that an owned issue agenda is more likely when a party has only its relatively strong or beneficial issues to demonstrate a relative electoral advantage, and when the party faces heightened pressure from its base. More popular incumbents can advance onto a broader issue agenda, in

¹² We provide information on the robustness of results across measures of issue competence, given different possible operationalisations of the concepts of competence and ownership.

¹³ Petrocik 1996, 827.

¹⁴ Petrocik 1996, 827.

addition to issues the party owns. Support for this theoretical prediction holds important consequences for the abilities of popular parties to further build on their success, but for unpopular parties to be forced to make an appeal to their base.¹⁵ Finally, we reveal how parties' reputations on issues have weaker explanatory power under divided US government. Divided government also weakens the conditional relationship between public issue salience and issue ownership. These combined contributions add to literature on the general effects of divided government on legislative outcomes and agendas.¹⁶

Issue Ownership and Executive and Legislative Agendas

The issue ownership theory of elections¹⁷ provides a widely accepted narrative to explain candidate and party issue emphasis in campaigns. Also known as saliency or selective emphasis theory,¹⁸ and consistent with Riker's dominance-dispersion principle,¹⁹ issue ownership theories predict that parties win votes (and presidents gain support²⁰), by emphasizing issues on which they have greatest public trust, association, and a reputation for competence.

Scholars have debated the degree to which selective issue emphasis occurs,²¹ whether ownership strategies are successful,²² and whether ownership campaign strategies can always be adopted in place of a focus on salient issues.²³ However, the empirical contribution and

¹⁵ See Green 2011.

¹⁶ Kelly 1993; Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Coleman, 1999; Binder 1999; Howell et al. 2000; Cohen 2012; Egan 2013.

¹⁷ See Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003.

¹⁸ Budge and Farlie 1977; 1983; Budge, Hearl, and Robertson 1987; Budge 1993.

¹⁹ Riker 1993.

²⁰ See Holian 2006.

²¹ Simon 2002; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Holian 2004; Damore 2004; 2005; Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006.

²² Norporth and Buchanan 1992.

²³ Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Bélanger and Meguid 2008.

explanatory power of these evaluations on party and candidate issue strategies has made the theory foremost in agenda-based accounts of vote-seeking party, president and candidate campaign-related behavior.

The concept of issue ownership has been translated into the executive and legislative domain, although in only a handful of cases. Holian²⁴ analyzed presidential remarks in public and Congressional hearings, identifying how a president is able to use issue framing and rhetoric to neutralize an opponent's ownership of an issue and gain a relative issue advantage. Sulkin²⁵ revealed how individual Congressmen/women take up issues in Congress to neutralize an opponent's issue advantage. These studies demonstrate how elites use a period in office to compete on issues their party does not own, trespassing onto an opponent's issues. Cummins²⁶ used issue ownership expectations to explain the president's issue agenda. In this case, the finding is that presidents promote party-owned issues in the State of the Union address, especially when conditions are less favorable to the president's agenda. In comparative work applying the concept of issue ownership to collective legislative agendas, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen²⁷ analyze the content of parliamentary speeches and motions, finding party issue emphasis of owned issues. Egan²⁸ identifies an effect of incumbent party issue ownership upon legislative outputs in Congress, demonstrating correspondence between 'partisan priorities' and the issues given legislative attention.²⁹ These studies find that elites will use a period of office to focus on their party's own issues.

²⁴ Holian 2004.

²⁵ Sulkin 2005.

²⁶ Cummins 2010.

²⁷ Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010.

²⁸ Egan 2013.

²⁹ Note that these claims do not bear upon whether an incumbent party (the party of the President) achieves the policies closest to its ideal point, but to the focus of the legislative institution on policy priorities. Egan (2013)

The existing evidence raises a number of questions. We need to further examine whether elites use a period in office to focus on their parties own issues or indeed whether the incentive is stronger to focus on issues a party does not own. We need to better answer the obvious and yet unanswered question concerning the *extent* to which parties, governments and presidents are able to shape the issue agenda to issues on which they have an advantage, and the extent to which this occurs across executive and legislative agendas. We further need to understand the extent to which issue ownership incentives are confined to the US context. A president may have particular incentives to be associated with the party's owned issues, and the polarized partisan nature of US politics in recent decades may condition the basis for strong issue associations in the minds of voters towards parties. Moreover, existing studies imply that issue ownership incentives may be conditional on a number of factors. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen³⁰ highlight how the incumbent party will be particularly constrained by the need to respond to salient policy problems. Cummins³¹ highlights the relevance of unified and divided government on the incentives for a president to focus his State of the Union address on issues that appeal to co-partisans. Egan,³² in his definition of issue ownership, reveals how the party base and party elites prioritize the issues the public come to associate the party with; the issues a party owns. The partisan context may therefore condition the relevance of issue ownership explanations on executive and legislative agendas.

A Contextual Theory of How Party Issue Reputations Influence Policy Agendas

Our starting point is to state the expectation that parties' reputations on issues will, in general, exert an effect on the issues given priority in executive and legislative agendas. There are three

reveals that voters do not necessarily agree more with a party on its owned issues; they simply associate the party with a commitment to them.

³⁰ Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010.

³¹ Cummins 2010.

³² Egan 2013.

reasons. First, election-oriented parties and presidents will try to gain ownership of issues, retain ownership of issues, and focus public and media attention on issues which advantage their electoral position via a period in office. This implies that incumbents predominantly give greater attention to issues on which they are more positively rated – whether via short term associations as parties come to have a temporary advantage on an issue, either via competition for ownership or via performance on specific issues, or via long-term reputations for issue ownership. Second, ownership of an issue assumes a long-standing party commitment to that issue; hence owned issues are associated with 'partisan priorities'.³³ We should expect policy-seeking politicians to advance issues on which they have a long-standing commitment and interest, and therefore for that long-standing commitment to be demonstrated in office. Third, we know that parliamentary parties; (a) tend to focus on party owned issues in manifestos and campaigns, at least to some degree, and (b) deliver the priorities of their manifestos in policy programs in government.³⁴ We therefore hypothesize issue ownership effects as follows.

H1: Executive and legislative policy agendas will be predicted by issue ownership – measured by public ratings of executive and legislature party issue competence.

We also note that issue ownership evaluations may arise from legislative attention over the longer term.³⁵ For now, our focus is on the shorter term effects of issue ownership *upon* legislative attention.

Our theory also hypothesizes limits on the contexts under which hypothesis 1 will hold.

Election campaigns themes and agendas are decided with electoral incentives at the forefront. However, the business of government is about responding to policy issues and

³³ Egan 2013.

³⁴ Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Hofferbert and Budge 1992; McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004; McDonald and Budge 2005.

³⁵ See Green and Jennings n.d.

problems; those concerns ranked most highly salient among the wider public.³⁶ Government, presidential and legislative incentives differ from party or candidate election incentives. A government, president and legislative party responds to calls from pressure groups, party coalitions, media and public opinion, and must respond to the wider policy environment in the form of perceived deterioration (or otherwise) in public services, and economic and foreign policy 'events'.³⁷ Yet government and legislative attention is scarce because policy priorities require considerable legislative attention and time.³⁸ Policy-makers must therefore allocate attention to issues selectively, such that incentives to attend to a party's owned issues must be considered alongside incentives to attend to salient policy issues and problems. Given the influence of issue salience on government attention, we hypothesize that changes in issue salience, most often due to exogenous shifts in problem status,³⁹ should trump electoral considerations and a party's long-standing priorities. Hypothesis 2 predicts that the effect of issue ownership on policy agendas will, *ceteris paribus*, be weakened when the explanatory power of issue salience is heightened.

H2: The effects of issue competence evaluations on executive and legislative policy agendas will be attenuated by the salience of policy issues.

If incentives exist because political elites wish to prime and highlight areas of party policy strength,⁴⁰ these incentives should be greater when stronger electoral pressures on the incumbent exist; that is, when party popularity is low. When a party loses popular support, its owned issues represent its remaining issue advantages, forcing it to compete on a relatively narrow set of

³⁶ Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014.

³⁷ Cohen 1999; Karol 2009.

³⁸ Jones 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Adler and Wilkerson 2012.

³⁹ E.g. Hibbs 1979; Baumgartner and Jones 1993.

⁴⁰ Sulkin 2005; 2009.

owned issues.⁴¹ When popularity is high, incumbents trespass onto an opponent's issue or issues, convincing the electorate of their superior handling abilities and potential 'ownership' via presidential persuasion and rhetorical tools.⁴² There will still be a focus on owned issues for popular incumbents, but the issue agenda should be broader. A party's owned issues are those which the party elite and the party's voters consider most consistently important.⁴³ We therefore posit that an issue competence focus will be more likely when a party is forced back onto its electoral base, during periods of relatively low popularity. Such incentives may be reinforced due to an increased need for co-partisan support for legislation: legislators will support a party's policy agenda more readily on issues those legislators deem most important. This leads us to hypothesis 3(a).

H3a: The effects of issue competence evaluations on executive/legislative policy agendas will be attenuated by the electoral popularity of the incumbent/majority party.

There is also a body of research which would point in the opposite direction. This research suggests that popular presidents, for example, feel less pressure to cater to public opinion.⁴⁴ In this case incumbents may use periods of increased electoral popularity to focus greater and more narrow attention on those issues they care most about – those issues the party owns. In this case, we alternatively consider that competence effects can be enhanced when party popularity is high.⁴⁵ We consider both hypotheses 3(a) and 3(b) in light of these countervailing expectations.

H3b: The effects of issue competence evaluations on executive/legislative policy agendas will be increased the higher the electoral popularity of the incumbent/majority party.

⁴¹ Green 2011.

⁴² Holian 2004.

⁴³ Egan 2013.

⁴⁴ Hibbs 1987; Hicks 1984; Manza and Cook 2002.

⁴⁵ We also note the Canes-Wrone Herron, and Shotts (2001) hypothesis that policy spending responsiveness is lowest when popularity is low or high but greatest at average popularity levels (also Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004), suggesting that issue salience responsiveness should vary non-monotonically.

The issue ownership theory of Petrocik⁴⁶ expects parties to do better when their owned issues are salient. We therefore recognize that popularity at t-1 may be partly a product of ownership and salience at t-2.

The US institutional system will place a further constraint on the translation of an incumbent party's issue priorities; the presence of divided government.⁴⁷ Scholars demonstrate significant effects of divided government on the passing of fewer agenda items,⁴⁸ on un-passed laws, on laws without presidential backing,⁴⁹ on reduced quantities of significant enactments and weaker responsiveness to the public mood.⁵⁰ Congressional party fortunes are tied to a president's successful policy agenda⁵¹ and to the party's collective reputation, established through legislative victories.⁵² We therefore expect divided government to weaken the transmission of a president's party's owned issues into the policy agenda, resulting in a weaker effect of issue competence evaluations (hypothesis 1). Such effects should be stronger with respect to the legislative agenda, but presidents may also anticipate these constraints and moderate their executive speeches. We therefore specify H4 to the policy agenda in general.

H4: The effects of issue competence evaluations on policy agendas will be weaker under periods of divided government.

It should also hold that the trade-off between issue salience and issue competence (either in the direction of *H3a* or *H3b*) should be weaker under divided government. A divided government is less able to achieve its policy goals overall. A majority Congressional party may share the incentives of a president to be responsive to high salience public concerns, but parties

⁴⁶ Petrocik 1996.

⁴⁷ Egan 2013.

⁴⁸ Binder 1999.

⁴⁹ Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997.

⁵⁰ Coleman 1999.

⁵¹ Lebo and O'Geen 2011.

⁵² Cox and McCubbins 1993; 2005.

can share priorities but differ on their ideal policy positions, which may result in heightened chances of gridlock on salient issues. The transmission of issues into legislation will therefore be stronger when the House and presidency are unified than when government is divided, consistent with findings of lower responsiveness to public opinion under divided government⁵³ and the pursuit of narrower agendas by incumbent parties and presidents.⁵⁴

H₅: The attenuating relationship between issue ownership and salience will be weaker under divided government.

Data and Measures

We examine our hypotheses in two countries and in two different institutional arenas; for the executive and the legislature in the US and in the UK, where powers are fused. We expect differences across institutions to give rise to variation in the strength of issue ownership effects.

The State of the Union address is a high profile vehicle for communicating the president's agenda⁵⁵, subject to relatively few institutional constraints, or 'friction',⁵⁶ that limit the issues a President can attend to – although presidents can incur costs from talking about policy issues.⁵⁷ The address is a major set piece event of the political calendar providing incentives for the emphasis of partisan-owned issues, while its format offers relative scope for short-term responses to increases (or decreases) in the salience of issues. We therefore expect strong issue ownership effects on the State of the Union address, stronger than on congressional legislation, and also strong attenuating effects of issue salience, and of popularity.

⁵³ Coleman 1999.

⁵⁴ Coleman 1999; Howell et al. 2000; Cohen 2012.

⁵⁵ Light 1982.

⁵⁶ Jones et al. 2003; Jones and Baumgartner 2005.

⁵⁷ Cohen 1997.

In the US law-making requires cooperation between both houses of Congress and the president; imposing higher decision costs,⁵⁸ even in situations of unified control of government. This need for cooperation is likely to mitigate emphasis on partisan priorities, and may to a lesser extent limit responsiveness to the salience of issues to the public. Pressures of electoral competition on representatives might lead to equally strong levels of sensitivity to popularity as we would expect from electoral incentives upon the State of the Union address.

The UK's parliamentary system might be expected to give rise to fewer party issue ownership incentives. The fusion of legislative and executive powers means that governing parties face fewer constraints due to institutional friction on the issues they can attend to, but at the same time are insulated from electoral pressures which might otherwise create incentives for emphasis of party issue strengths. It also reduces the propensity for law-makers to be responsive in the short-term to changes in issue salience or popularity.

We test our hypotheses in the UK using Acts of Parliament and the content of the Speech from the Throne (the Queen's Speech), and in the US using data on major legislation of US Congress and the content of the State of the Union address.⁵⁹ Data on policy attention are from the US Policy Agendas Project and its UK counterpart.⁶⁰ They range from 1950 to 2010 in the UK and from 1947 to 2012 in the US. Each piece of legislation is coded with a single topic, indicating the primary focus of the legislation, and the observed time point is the date upon which the act or the bill was signed into law. The dependent variables can take a value between 0% and 100%. For the US, legislation is weighted according to its importance, using a measure of “most important laws” based on the amount of coverage received in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (following Adler and Wilkerson⁶¹).⁶² We use this weighting to avoid any over-estimation

⁵⁸ Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003.

⁵⁹ In robustness tests we also use US data on Congressional hearings, Executive Orders and Congressional Bills.

⁶⁰ www.policyagendas.org and www.policyagendas.org.uk

⁶¹ Adler and Wilkerson 2012.

of divided government effects but this adjustment is not required in the UK (where the dependent variable represents major legislation of government and minor legislation tending to be enacted through statutory instruments). The contents of the State of the Union address and the Queen's Speech are divided into 'quasi-sentences'; expressions of a single policy idea or issue (commonly used in analysis of executive speeches⁶³). The unit of analysis is therefore the proportion of each speech allocated to a particular topic (the economy, minorities and rights, health, labor, employment and immigration, education, environment, law and order, welfare and housing, defense, foreign affairs, or government). Issue categories are combined to match topics with our dataset on public evaluations of competence, and to make these comparable across countries.⁶⁴ While data on policy agendas are available in many other countries, the survey data on public opinion about party competence are only available for sufficient issue categories and over a long enough time period for the US and UK, providing a unique opportunity to examine these variables over repeated electoral and legislative cycles.

We gathered responses to over 8,000 survey items about party competence to handle particular issues or policy problems. The data consist of 5,098 administrations of 1,297 different questions by fifty-eight polling organizations in the US, and 2,922 administrations of 170 different questions by six polling organizations in the UK. In the US the question wording often asks which party the public 'trust to do a better job of handling' a given issue, while in the UK the wording tends to focus on the party that is 'best able to handle' defined issues or problems.⁶⁵

⁶² This simply weights each law by the number of lines of coverage it receives in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (divided by the overall number of lines of coverage in a given year). This means that salient/landmark legislation is not treated in the same way as minor procedural law-making.

⁶³ E.g. Mortensen et al. 2011.

⁶⁴ The issue categories are summarized in Tables A1 and A3 of the online appendix.

⁶⁵ Examples are provided in the online appendix.

The data are categorized into the same eleven policy categories as for the dependent variables.⁶⁶ Most questions require respondents to choose between specified political parties: typically between the Republican and Democratic Party in the US with the option of a non-response ('none' or 'don't know'). In the UK the options tend to be Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberals/Liberal Democrats. We drop responses for the third and other parties and non-responses and calculate issue competence scores as the percentage of the two-party share. Issue competence is based in the US on evaluations of the president's party (for the executive agenda) or of the majority party in the House (for the legislative agenda). We take all available observations for each of the eleven topics *for the previous election cycle*.⁶⁷ Using the current cycle could violate the temporal ordering of the variables (with some of the issue ownership ratings observed prior to the policy agenda and some observed after) and could also lead to endogeneity. Taking the average issue competence score across the previous election cycle also ensures our measure of ownership is less sensitive to sparse/missing data in some periods.

Our measure of party competence captures the relative strengths and weaknesses of the incumbent party across the eleven policy categories; which issues a party is best on relative to other issues, according to the level of public confidence in the incumbent party on each issue. We take the ranking of each issue from one to eleven using the mean level of competence for each issue to determine which issue is rated best relative to another, in each electoral cycle. This rank measure is distinctive in the field of issue ownership literature, which tends to take the mean rating of a party on an issue, or the lead of one party over another on an issue, or the mean

⁶⁶ All data from this project are available on our website, which includes all replication materials for this paper [insert web address here]. There are missing data for some categories in some periods due to the discontinuous nature of survey data. An average of 7.9 issue categories is used in the US per election cycle and 7.2 in the UK. Observations with missing values are omitted in the reported analyses, and data falling into an 'other' category are also excluded.

⁶⁷ For the US, the 'electoral cycle' refers to each four-year presidential term for the executive agenda and the two-year congressional term for the legislative agenda. For the UK, this covers the time period between general elections.

rating of a party on an issue subtracting the party's overall popularity. The rank measure reflects four conceptually-based operationalisation decisions: (i) It is less sensitive to parties' gains or losses in popularity than most traditional measures. If a party gains or loses popularity, its overall competence on every issue rises and falls.⁶⁸ (ii) The possibility of variance in public opinion about issues. We argue that elites focus on issues to gain ownership, to reflect changes in evaluations on performance (which benefit them electorally), and to reflect long-standing partisan priorities. We therefore use a measure that captures change in issue evaluations, as well as over-time strengths on owned issues, concepts both captured in Petrocik's⁶⁹ definition of issue ownership. (iii) The need to explain relative issue attention using relative issue-evaluations. The ordering of a party's best issues and worst issues will provide the most meaningful explanation of the relative ordering, or prioritisation, of issues by the executive or legislature. (iv) The need to estimate the effects of ownership across issues, rather than on an issue-by-issue basis. The measure is coded between $12-k$ and 11, where k is the total number of topics on which competence evaluations are available during a given election cycle and where '11' refers to the top-ranked issue and '1' to the lowest ranked. We provide additional support for our theory using alternative measures of issue competence in robustness checks, although, as expected, the results are less consistent across each of the analysed cases. They are equally consistent in our analysis of the State of the Union address.

The salience of policy issues is measured using aggregate data on public responses to the survey question about the 'most important problem' (MIP),⁷⁰ available between 1947 and 2012 in

⁶⁸ Green and Jennings 2012.

⁶⁹ Petrocik 1996.

⁷⁰ Data for Gallup's "most important problem" question is not available in the UK after 2001 so we use Ipsos-MORI "most important issue" (MII) data, enabling a continuous measure of issue salience given common variation of the measures (see Jennings and Wlezien 2011).

the US and between 1950 and 2010 in the UK. Responses are standardized for each survey to total 100% and then averaged across the calendar year where multiple surveys are available.⁷¹

Popular support for the governing party is measured using data on vote intentions for each country by calendar year. A dataset of 3,464 polls from national surveys on vote intention is used in the UK for the period between 1945 and 2010, where respondents were asked which party they would vote ‘if the election were held tomorrow’.⁷² We use support for the president’s party or the majority Congressional party in the generic congressional ballot in the US consisting of 1,997 polls from 1942,⁷³ supplemented with data from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research’s *iPoll* databank.

The measure of divided government in the US is coded 1 if the presidency and House are controlled by a different party and 0 if they are controlled by the same party.⁷⁴

Method of analysis

Time series cross-sectional first order autoregressive, AR(1), models are estimated for all issue categories (i.e. panels) for each country and policy agenda. These panels consist of the eleven issues categories for the US executive (the State of the Union address) and then the legislature (most important laws). In the UK the panels consist of eleven issue categories for the legislative agenda (Acts of UK Parliament) and for the executive agenda (the Queen’s Speech). The models take the following form: ⁷⁵

⁷¹ See www.policyagendas.org; Jennings and Wlezien 2011.

⁷² Wlezien et al. 2012.

⁷³ Wlezien and Erikson 2002; Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010.

⁷⁴ We also tested alternative measures of divided government, where the presidency and the Senate or the House are controlled by a different party, finding the same substantive results.

⁷⁵ The dependent variable (i.e. the executive and legislative agendas in the US and executive and legislative agenda in the UK) was tested for stationarity using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test. This led to rejection of the presence of

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{AGENDA}_{it} = & \alpha^*_0 \\
& + \alpha^*_1 \text{OWNERSHIP}_{it-c} \\
& + \beta^*_1 \text{SALIENCE}_{it} \\
& + \beta^*_2 \text{SALIENCE}_{it} * \text{OWNERSHIP}_{it-c} \\
& + \beta^*_3 \text{POPULARITY}_t \\
& + \beta^*_4 \text{POPULARITY}_t * \text{OWNERSHIP}_{it-c} \\
& + \beta^*_5 \text{DIVIDED}_t \\
& + \beta^*_6 \text{DIVIDED}_t * \text{OWNERSHIP}_{it-c} \\
& + \beta^*_7 \text{DIVIDED}_t * \text{SALIENCE}_{it} \\
& + \beta^*_8 \text{DIVIDED}_t * \text{SALIENCE}_{it} * \text{OWNERSHIP}_{it-c} \\
& + \gamma^* \text{ELECTION CYCLE}_{itj}
\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Where AGENDA_{it} refers to the proportion of the policy agenda assigned to a given issue i at time t , α^*_0 represents the intercept, OWNERSHIP_{it-c} refers to issue competence ranking in the previous electoral cycle (hence $t-c$, not $t-1$), SALIENCE_{it} refers to the percentage of respondents assigning each issue as the most important in the current period, and POPULARITY_t refers to the share of popular support for the governing party, also at time t .⁷⁶ For the US policy agenda DIVIDED_t is also interacted with SALIENCE_{it} and OWNERSHIP_{it-c} . We include time-fixed effects by election cycle j , to control for election period variation in parties' competence ratings across time. The models including DIVIDED_t are presented with and without time period effects due to covariance between some of these periods and the DIVIDED_t variable.

unit root at the 95 per cent confidence level. Data are therefore modelled in level form rather than in first differences.

⁷⁶ The lagged model tests the effect of issue ownership rating in the previous electoral cycle $t-c$ on the policy agenda at t . It is also possible that the agenda at $t-1$ affects ownership at t . We test for an effect in the reverse direction, treating ownership in the next electoral cycle as the dependent variable, but this produces much weaker results in terms of statistical significance and model fit. The above model implies that a party that has recently gained a high ranking of an issue - perhaps by trespassing - will be more likely to attend to the issue at time t . A party may continue to focus on an issue it has recently gained an advantage upon, but it could also be less likely to do so. The model will not account, obviously, for all instances, but we note that successful trespassing is relatively rare.

The model is estimated with panel-corrected standard errors⁷⁷ which controls for panel heteroscedasticity and contemporaneous correlations of the errors. It is fitted with the Prais-Winsten method to test for serial autocorrelation (μ_{it}), with the ρ estimated separately for each panel as the first-order autoregressive process: $\mu_{it} = \rho\mu_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{it}$. This allows the rate of persistence to vary across units (i.e. panels), consistent with the expectation that there will be greater stability in the attention of policy-makers to some issues compared to others.⁷⁸

Results: US

The results are presented first for the policy agenda of the State of the Union address. Model 1 includes the results for the main effects of issue ownership and salience. Model 2 includes the results for the interactions relating to *H2* (the salience moderation hypothesis) and *H3* (the popularity moderation hypothesis), and model 3 addresses the interactions pertaining to *H4* and *H5* (the divided government hypotheses). Model 4 includes the full model but omits the election cycle dummies for comparison.⁷⁹

Table 1 about here

Table 1 reveals support for hypothesis 1: differences in issue competence evaluations for a president's party predict the policy attention of the president in the State of the Union address. The main effect of issue competence is significant in all four models and the addition of additional variables enhances the effect of issue competence on the policy agenda of executive speeches. In terms of substantive interpretation, a rank increase of one-point leads to an increase of 5.43 percentage points in executive attention to the issue, in model 3. The lowest ranked issue, on average, receives 54.3 percentage points less attention than the highest ranked issue ($5.43 * (11-1)$). The main effects of issue salience are also significant in each model, consistent with

⁷⁷ Beck and Katz 1995.

⁷⁸ The models were also estimated using an autoregressive distributed lag framework and without panel-corrected standard errors. These led to the same conclusions.

⁷⁹ Models with and without all election dummies are reported in supplementary appendices.

Baumgartner and Jones⁸⁰ and Jones et al.,⁸¹ who reveal that the president's policy agenda is responsive to issues of public concern.

Table 1 also reveals support for hypothesis 2 which predicted that the effects of issue competence would be moderated by issue salience. The term $SALIENCE_{it} * OWNERSHIP_{it-c}$ is negative and significant when entered into model 2, and remains significant when additional variables are included in the equation in model 3 (also when the time fixed effects are removed in model 4). The following Figure 1(a) displays the marginal effect of issue competence rank over values of issue salience (model 3).

Figure 1(a) about here

The slope in Figure 2(a) indicates a drop in effect size from around 5.0 to just less than 3.0 (where confidence interval values do not cross zero) and a significant effect of relative issue competence when values of issue salience are between 0 and 27. As issues become more salient, the explanatory power of issue competence is removed, but issue competence effects are significant at low values of issue salience. Reversing the x- and y-axis (not shown in Figure 2a), the effect of issue salience is removed when parties are ranked highest on policy issues. These relationships support the theorised relationship: there is a trade-off between whether incumbents emphasize their own issues, or whether they emphasize salient issues.

We hypothesized two further conditions under which relative issue competence evaluations would be weaker; when electoral popularity is higher (*H3a*), or conversely lower (*H3b*), and under conditions of divided government (*H4*). Models 2, 3 and 4 address these hypotheses. The results in all three models support hypothesis 3(a) rather than hypothesis 3(b). The significant and negative relationship on the $OWNERSHIP_{it-c} * POPULARITY_t$ interaction reveals that the effects of issue competence are weaker when electoral popularity is higher. This relationship is demonstrated using marginal effects (based on model 3) in Figure 1(b).

⁸⁰ Baumgartner and Jones 2004.

⁸¹ Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009.

Figure 1(b) about here

Figure 2(b) demonstrates a substantial drop in issue competence effect size as party popularity increases, crossing zero at around 50% in vote intention share.⁸² The president is more likely to attend to owned issues in the State of the Union address when his party faces a weaker position in the polls, but relative issue competence has no effect when the party is more popular. Issue ownership incentives disappear at higher levels of electoral support.

Model 3 in Table 1 suggests some tentative support for hypothesis 4 which predicted that the effects of issue competence will be weaker under divided government. The coefficient for the $OWNERSHIP_{itc} * DIVIDED_t$ interaction is negative in direction and just misses significance at the 90% level ($p=0.12$). These results indicate that divided government does not significantly reduce the tendency of presidents to focus attention on their owned issues, although there is some suggestion of an effect in the expected direction. However, it is interesting to observe the moderating effect of divided government on issue salience effects on executive speeches, which suggests that presidents may avoid high salience issues because they cannot expect policy successes on those issues, or because those issues become salient due to policy problems and attributable failings – more likely under divided government than when government is unified – which a president would rather not bring attention to.

Our final hypothesis (*H5*) predicted that the relationship between issue salience and competence would be weaker under divided government. The significant three-way interaction in the final row of Table 1, in models 3 and 4, supports this hypothesis. Further examination of the marginal effects for $SALIENCE_{it} * OWNERSHIP_{itc}$ when $DIVIDED_t = 0$ or 1 (not displayed) reveals that the relationship between salience and competence is weaker when the House and presidency are divided and stronger when unified. While incentives to respond to salient issues will moderate a tendency of presidents to attend to their party's owned issues, this moderating relationship no longer holds when the president faces a House controlled by the opposing party.

⁸² We confine the range of the x-axis to the minimum and maximum values.

We next examine the hypotheses by analyzing the effects of relative issue competence and the hypothesized contextual relationships on the policy agenda of Congress. We argued earlier that it might be expected that the effects of issue competence will be stronger in executive speeches. The executive speech is especially partisan and it also subject to fewer institutional constraints and 'friction'.⁸³ However, it should also be true that issue competence effects remain influential in Congress due to the priority given to owned issues by party elites. We expect divided government to exert a stronger attenuating effect on the transmission of issue ownership incentives in legislation rather than in speeches.

Table 2 about here

The first row of Table 2 provides evidence in support of hypothesis 1. There is a significant effect of issue competence on the policy agenda of Most Important Laws in Congress. Evidence for this is found in models 2 and 3 which include election period fixed effects and the additional variables for party popularity (model 2) and divided government (model 3). There is a large increase in effect size between model 1 and model 2 as variables for party popularity and interactions are added. In terms of substantive interpretation, the coefficient size for issue competence in model 2 denotes that an increase of one-point on the issue ownership scale leads to an increase of 6.41 percentage points in the attention of Congress for the incumbent party.

Table 2 also provides support for the contextual hypotheses. Significant effects for the interaction term $SALIENCE_{it} * OWNERSHIP_{it-c}$ are found in model 3 and model 4. The significant negative interaction coefficients confirm the hypothesized trade-off between ownership effects and salience. In order to interpret this relationship, Figure 2(a) presents the marginal effect of issue competence across values of issue salience, based on model 3.

Figure 2(a) about here

Figure 2(a) reveals that issue competence evaluations exert a significant effect upon the policy agenda in most important laws when issues are low in salience. The confidence intervals cross

⁸³ Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003; Jones and Baumgartner 2005.

zero at a salience score of 25, revealing a similar pattern of effects to those identified in the policy agenda of State of the Union speeches (in Figure 1a, above).

Support is also found in Table 2 for the hypothesis relating to the relationship between issue competence and electoral popularity (*H3*). Models 2 and 3 in Table 2 reveal significant negative effects for the $OWNERSHIP_{it-c} * POPULARITY_t$ interaction, revealing that issue competence effects on Congressional legislation are weakened when the majority party's electoral popularity is higher and made stronger when the majority party is weaker in the polls. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 2(b), which exhibits the marginal effects.

Figure 2(b) about here

There are very strong parallels in these effects comparing Figure 2(b) for legislation, above, and Figure 1(b) for executive speeches. These findings jointly reveal that electorally popular parties are much less influenced by the relative issue competence evaluations of the public than are electorally unpopular parties, giving support to hypothesis 3(a) rather than to hypothesis 3(b).

The remaining hypotheses predicted that issue competence effects would be weaker under divided government (*H4*), and that the moderating effect of issue salience on issue competence would also be weaker under divided government (*H5*). These hypotheses are supported in model 3 (*H5*) – and in model 3 (*H4* and *H5*).

Note that the effect of divided government on attention to salient issues is strongly significant in Table 2, as it was in Table 1. Thus, one of the additional observations made possible in these analyses is that of reduced responsiveness of Congress to salient issues under divided government, and reduced responsiveness in executive speeches. These findings reveal support for existing scholarship which highlights the constraints on opinion responsiveness under divided government.⁸⁴ However, support for hypothesis 4 (relating to weaker issue ownership effects under divided government) is less strong across analyses of the two dependent variables. Our overarching measure of issue competence suggests that the general effect of

⁸⁴ See Coleman 1999.

divided or unified government is more limited. Where our evidence is strongest, however, it points to an effect on Congressional legislation rather than on executive speeches.

Results: UK

Here we examine the effects of issue ownership on Acts of the UK parliament, reflecting the legislative agenda of the UK government. We do not include variables for divided government. We therefore test hypothesis 1 (which predicted issue competence effects on the policy agenda), hypothesis 2 (which predicted the moderating effect of issue salience on issue competence effects) and hypothesis 3 (which predicted the moderating effect of party electoral popularity on issue competence effects). The results for the policy agenda of the UK government for Acts of Parliament are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 about here

The results for the UK policy agenda in Acts of Parliament bear strong resemblance to those for the US, revealing that issue ownership incentives – and their contextual explanations – exist outside the US presidential context.

The first row of Table 3 reveals partial support for hypothesis 1. The effect of issue competence in model 1 is, counter to expectations, significant and negative. However, once governing party popularity and the interaction terms (with salience and popularity) are included, the coefficient for issue competence is positive and near significant in model 2 ($p = 0.102$), and positive and significant in model 3, suggesting support for hypothesis 1. Such a sign reversal can be indicative of multi-collinearity, and substantial correlation is observed here between each of the interaction terms and one of their constitutive variables.⁸⁵ However, as Brambor et al.⁸⁶ point out, presence of multi-collinearity in a multiplicative interaction model may inflate standard

⁸⁵ Specifically, we observe a correlation that is equal to greater than 0.9 between $SALIENCE_{it} * OWNERSHIP_{it-c}$ and $SALIENCE_{it}$ and between $OWNERSHIP_{it-c} * POPULARITY_t$ and $OWNERSHIP_{it-c}$.

⁸⁶ Brambor et al. 2006, 70.

errors, due to insufficient information for parameter estimation, but these standard errors are still “correct” (i.e. this simply reduces the likelihood of observing significant effects).

Nevertheless, the instability of our results for UK Acts requires caution about inferences that can be derived (a further way to address multicollinearity is to add data, as we shall do in a moment). There is limited evidence, therefore, that relative issue competence evaluations of the governing party exert an effect on the policy agenda of Acts of Parliament.

The third row of Table 3 reveals more consistent support for hypothesis 2 for UK Acts. The effect of issue competence is moderated by the salience of issues, where the interaction term $SALIENCE_{it} * OWNERSHIP_{it-c}$ is negative and significant, in both models 2 and 3. These results mirror those found in the US. The incentive to focus on the governing party's owned issues is weaker when the effect of responsiveness to salient issues is greater. There is also some support in model 3 in Table 3 for hypothesis 3(a), which predicted that issue competence effects would be moderated by incumbent party electoral popularity (in model 2 the effect of the interaction between issue competence and popularity is near significant, $p=0.107$). Examining the marginal effects (not shown), relative issue competence ratings exert a significant effect upon executive and legislative policy agendas when parties are electorally weaker, but effects are no longer significant when parties are electorally strong, just as found in the US analyses. Thus, while incumbent parties may use a period in office to focus on their partisan priorities, those priorities are more likely to be associated with legislative policy agendas for electorally vulnerable parties. Incumbents with a larger electoral mandate may still attend in legislation to their owned issues, but their broader issue agenda, as well as the tendency to trespass onto other parties' issues when incumbents have broad public appeal, results in weaker correspondence between issue competence evaluations and government policy agendas – both in the US and in the UK.

As we noted, a further way of dealing with multicollinearity is to add data. In the UK the fusion of powers between the executive and the legislature means that we can also test the effect of issue ownership on the policy agenda set out in the Queen's Speech in combination with Acts

of UK Parliament. The results for this model are presented in Table 4. These provide stronger support for hypothesis 1. The direct effect of issue competence in model 1 (the linear-additive model) is not significant, meaning there is no sign reversal in terms of statistical significance. Further, the effect of issue competence is positive and significant in models 2 and 3, indicating that relative issue competence evaluations of the governing party exert an effect on the policy agenda of government. In the aggregated model of the UK executive and legislative agenda, we find less support for hypothesis 2, that issue competence is moderated by the salience of issues, though the coefficients are signed (negatively) in the direction expected and just outside the 90 per cent confidence level. Finally, there is much stronger support for hypothesis 3(a), that issue competence effects are moderated by government popularity, with negative and significant effects in both model 2 and 3. By adding data we observe more consistent results, though these still are not as strong as in the US, in particular the State of the Union address.⁸⁷

Table 4 about here

These results are, to the best of our knowledge, the first to draw cross-national parallels in issue competence effects on executive and legislative policy agendas.

UK government policy attention and US executive and legislative attention is explained by incumbent party issue competence rankings. Our contextual theory of issue ownership effects is also given support. Issue ownership effects are attenuated by the salience of issues and by the electoral popularity of the incumbent party. US findings bearing on institutional variation concerning unified and divided government also suggest that issue ownership effects – and issue salience effects – are stronger under unified government, as is the moderating effect of issue salience on issue ownership. It is both interesting and important that the results hold across the two country cases. Our results suggest that partisan priorities – where these are measured using public opinion about party reputations on issues – translate into legislation outside the US

⁸⁷ We provide results using only the data on the Queen's Speech in supplementary analyses. These provide support for Hypotheses 2.

context. We therefore contend that similar issue ownership incentives are likely to exist across country and party system, but our contextual theory suggests that constraints are important.

However, it is also noticeable that our findings are stronger and more robust in the US case, and for the State of the Union address relative to Acts of US Congress. This pattern fits with our expectations regarding differences between political institutions. Firstly, strong results for the State of the Union address are consistent with its agenda-setting function, and low levels of institutional friction – enabling presidents both to seek to emphasize partisan issue strengths and react to issues of public concern. The slightly weaker results for Congressional law-making are consistent with the greater constraints for the majority party in passing legislation. The even weaker findings of issue ownership effects for the UK are also consistent with our expectations, which suggested that the relative absence of electoral pressure might reduce incentives to stress party issue strengths in the policy agenda of government, and to respond to short-term changes in issue salience or electoral popularity. Overall, then, the evidence indicates that issue ownership effects are shaped by their institutional context.

Robustness (and Limits) of Results

We argued above that a rank measure of issue ownership should be particularly useful when predicting the relative attention of executives and legislatures, and such a measure also minimizes the issue of endogeneity and shared variation in issue evaluations.⁸⁸ However, Petrocik's⁸⁹ original measure took the mean ratings of parties on issues, and other linear measures have been used subsequently. We therefore subjected our theory to additional tests. The first applied a measure of relative issue strengths and weaknesses, akin to our rank measure of issue competence, but taking the difference of each mean competence evaluation by issue from the mean evaluation across all issues for each election period, divided by the standard deviation (a

⁸⁸ Green and Jennings n.d.

⁸⁹ Petrocik 1996.

standardised interval level measure of issue competence). This measure should be expected to control for some of the endogeneity in issue competence evaluations, since the mean of all issues can fluctuate, but the relative strengths are recorded by standardised distance from the mean. Using this measure we found support for four of our hypotheses (hypotheses 1 thru 4), although without consistency across country and institutional context. The results were robust in analyses of the State of the Union address, suggesting that our theory applies most reliably to executive speeches in the US, and is not sensitive to measurement in this context. Second, we estimated the models using the governing party lead over the opposition for each issue. This found equally as strong results (if not stronger) for the executive agenda in the US, but no effects for the legislative agenda in the US and UK, perhaps reflecting the endogenous nature of the lead of one party over another. Together these checks give us reassurance that our theory is supported over different operationalisations of issue ownership, although it is not supported entirely over different measures of competence. The US executive arena appears to be most reliably explained across measures of issue ownership, although our results using the rank measure are confirmatory across institutional contexts. The second conclusion we therefore draw is that a rank measure of competence best explains the relative prioritisation of issues in different contexts. A categorical definition where an issue is better or worse than other issues provides strong and the most robust insights into executive and legislative attention. It is reassuring that a relative measure, computed differently, also gives support to our general theory.

The findings using the rank measure are robust to a very wide range of alternative modeling specifications and underlying data checks. For example, to determine whether the greater availability of survey data on issue competence in later time periods had substantive consequences for the findings, we restricted the models to the period between 1970 and 2012 and the effects remained consistent. We tested whether effects could be different across periods, particularly before and after 1995 in the US, which marked the end of an otherwise unbroken period of Democratic control of the House. Those checks resulted in no differences to the main

effects or to the conclusions drawn from other variables. We took alternative operationalizations of governing party popularity into account (based on the proportion of presidential and majority party seats in the legislature (in the House, or in the UK parliament)) and this made no substantive difference to the results. We used a different operationalization of divided government in the US where *either* one of the House or the Senate was controlled by a different party to the president. These checks resulted in the same substantive conclusions with equivalent model fit. The same held true when controlling for the party of the incumbent, and for Democrat control of the House in the US before and after 1995. We also checked for collinearity in our interaction models, splitting the samples into low and high salience issues, where possible, and into periods of united or divided government; finding support for our key findings.

Finally, we examined support for our theory on two alternative cases where the data were sparser. We used Congressional hearings as our measure of the dependent variable in the US and the Queen's Speech alone as the dependent variable in the UK, finding a significant and positive effect of issue ownership and a significant and negative interaction of salience and issue ownership using Congressional hearings, and a significant negative interaction of salience and issue ownership using the Queen's Speech. These analyses support the importance of partisan priorities across a range of outcomes and the moderating constraint when issues are salient.

Conclusions

Issue ownership theories of party and candidate campaigning – specifying the tendency of political elites to seek to shift public attention on their ‘partisan priorities’;⁹⁰ their ‘owned issues’⁹¹ – account for the policy issues given greater attention in executive and legislative agendas. We expected that the public's relative ranking of parties’ issue ownership would result in a tendency

⁹⁰ Egan 2013.

⁹¹ Budge and Farlie 1977; 1983; Budge, Hearl, and Robertson 1987; Budge 1993; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003.

to legislate on higher ranked issues for the president, the majority party in Congress, and for the government in a parliamentary system. These predictions were supported in analyses spanning six decades in the US and to a lesser extent in the UK.

Our contextual theory of issue ownership specified three conditions under which issue ownership incentives would be constrained; when political elites are responsive to issues prioritized by the public (salient issues), when a party has a stronger electoral mandate and is less constrained by issues most important to the base (its 'partisan priorities'⁹²), and under divided government in the US. The results support these hypotheses.

The tension between issue ownership and salience effects reveals an important trade-off between pursuing partisan priorities and pursuing public priorities, representing an encouraging democratic tension. Our contextual theory therefore has desirable normative implications in both countries' institutional contexts and adds a new dimension to existing studies⁹³ of how partisan priorities shape policy agendas in the US.

The attenuating effect of party popularity on issue ownership explanations also reveals an important democratic tension; a president emphasizes the party's owned party issues when his party's electoral position is weaker, and majority legislative parties attend more to their owned issues in legislation when they are weaker in the polls. This is an important finding. For a popular party there is an additional benefit of being able to reach out on an opponent's issues, to potentially gain ownership of other issues (or a short-term benefit on an issue), and to appeal to a broad variety of issue-publics. There is a competitive and issue-based strategic advantage that comes with electoral popularity. An unpopular leader or incumbent party, however, cannot afford this luxury. Unpopular parties have to play to their base, further rendering an appeal to a broad constituency potentially more difficult and making it difficult to gain an advantage on new

⁹² Egan 2013.

⁹³ Cummins 2010; Egan 2013.

issues. Our findings suggest that issue trespassing findings⁹⁴ may apply especially for popular parties rather than for leaders and parties already lacking strong popular appeal.

Finally, our theory predicted that divided US government would weaken the effects of issue ownership evaluations and public priorities. This institutional context was found to have some effect on the translation of issue ownership incentives into congressional legislation, providing further reassurance concerning this democratic constraint on the use of office for the pursuit of a party's owned issues, although with weaker effects than found in other analysis of this question.⁹⁵ However, divided government significantly constrains the moderating effects between issue ownership and issue salience (and the direct effect of salient issues). These findings highlight the stated positive and negative consequences of divided government in tandem; the constraint on an otherwise unfettered executive in pursuing his or her partisan policy priorities, but the dual constraint of a divided executive and legislature in responding to issues of broad public concern.

We would like to test our theory in a greater number of country and institutional cases. Should new data become available, or should the analytic lens be on single-country case studies, future research might explore the application of these findings to different party systems, particularly where coalition government hinders the ability of any party to influence issue attention, where shared government and legislative compromise is commonplace. We would expect the same incentives to hold, but for the size of effects to potentially be reduced. Further research might also explore further the results in the US and the UK. Scholars might consider presidential and legislative responsiveness of an issue-by-issue basis; identifying instances where presidents are more responsive to salient issues under divided or unified government, and owned issues on which an incumbent party chooses not to place center stage in legislation. Our general measure of issue ownership effects does not preclude the possibility of individual exceptions; but

⁹⁴ Holian 2004.

⁹⁵ Egan 2013.

it reveals how effects are observed across available institutional contexts in general. Our results hold over a range of operationalisations of issue ownership - a rank measure, an interval-level standardised measure, and a measure based on the governing party's competence lead, but the results are not consistent in all contexts using the latter two measures. This caveat might lead to interesting questions concerning the meaning and measurement of issue competence. Our results are most strongly robust in the analysis of the State of the Union address, which suggests that this high profile salient context is particularly well-explained by issue ownership considerations, it also being subject to fewer institutional constraints. The results in the US are in general stronger than for the UK. The fusion of legislative and executive powers in the UK means that governing parties face fewer constraints due to institutional friction on the issues they can attend to, but at the same time are insulated from electoral pressures which might otherwise create incentives for emphasis of party issue strengths.

Political elites operate within a vast array of competing incentives. Those competing incentives; relating to public responsiveness on important and salient policy issues, and the competing incentive of emphasizing issues which appeal to the base (and which constitute remaining electoral strengths) condition the importance of issue ownership theories for governing agendas. Through the combination of insights of theories of attention-driven choice in government with theories of the role of selective emphasis, issue ownership and competence, there is potential for better understanding of when governments attend to their party-based ownership strengths and when other issues are prioritized above them.

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FIGURES

Figure 1(a). Marginal Effects of Issue Ownership for values of Issue Salience in the US State of the Union address

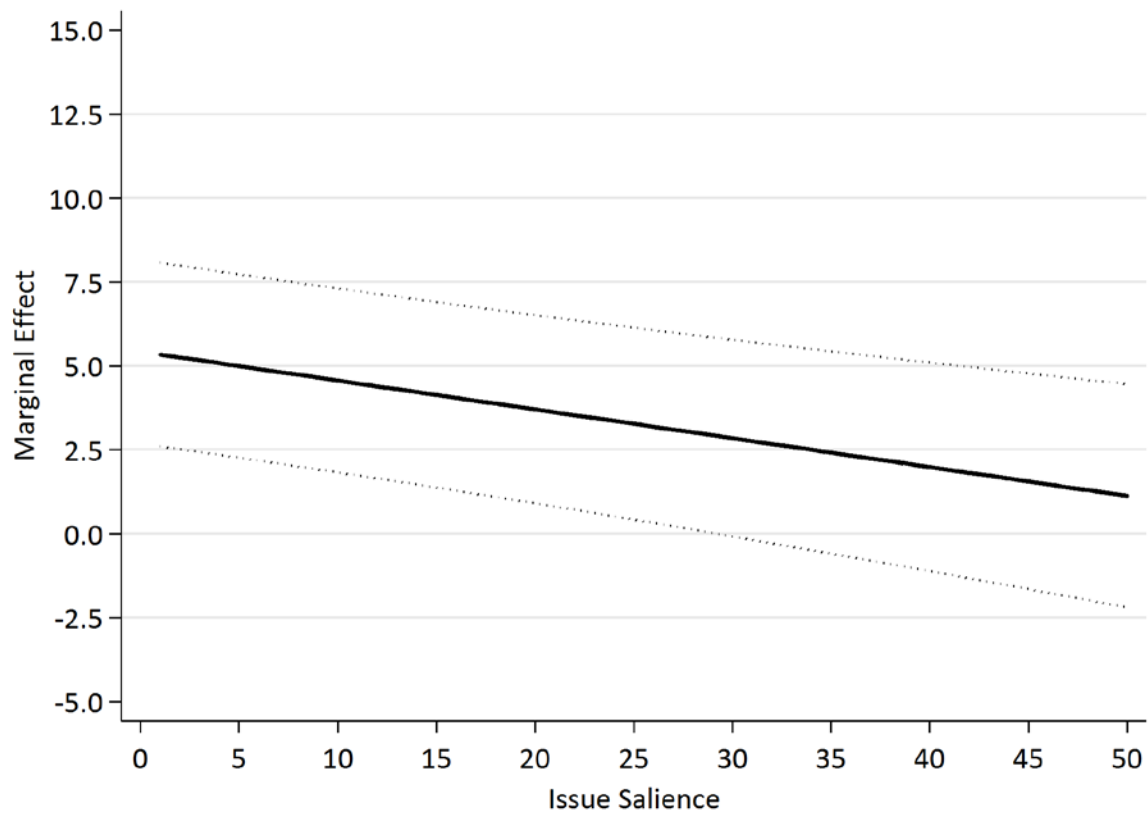


Figure 1(b). Marginal Effects of Issue Ownership for values of Popularity in the US State of the Union address

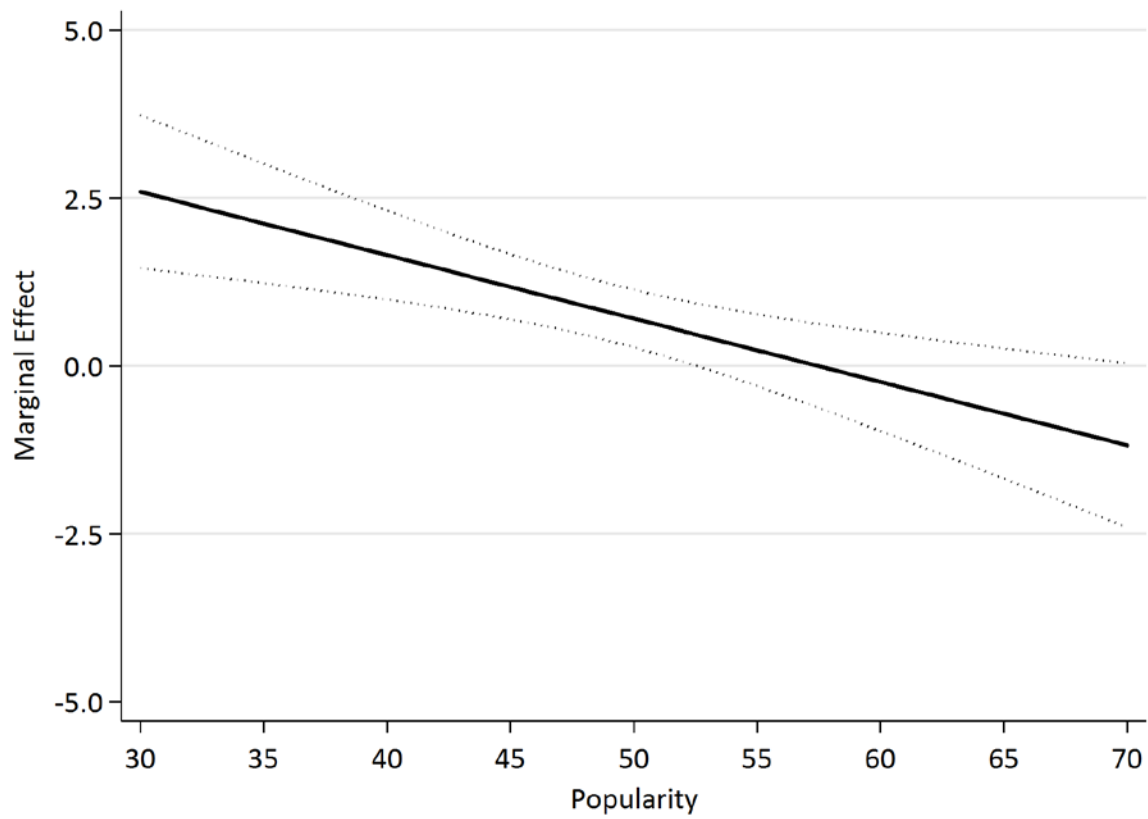


Figure 2(a). Marginal Effects of Issue Ownership for values of Issue Salience in Major Legislation in Congress

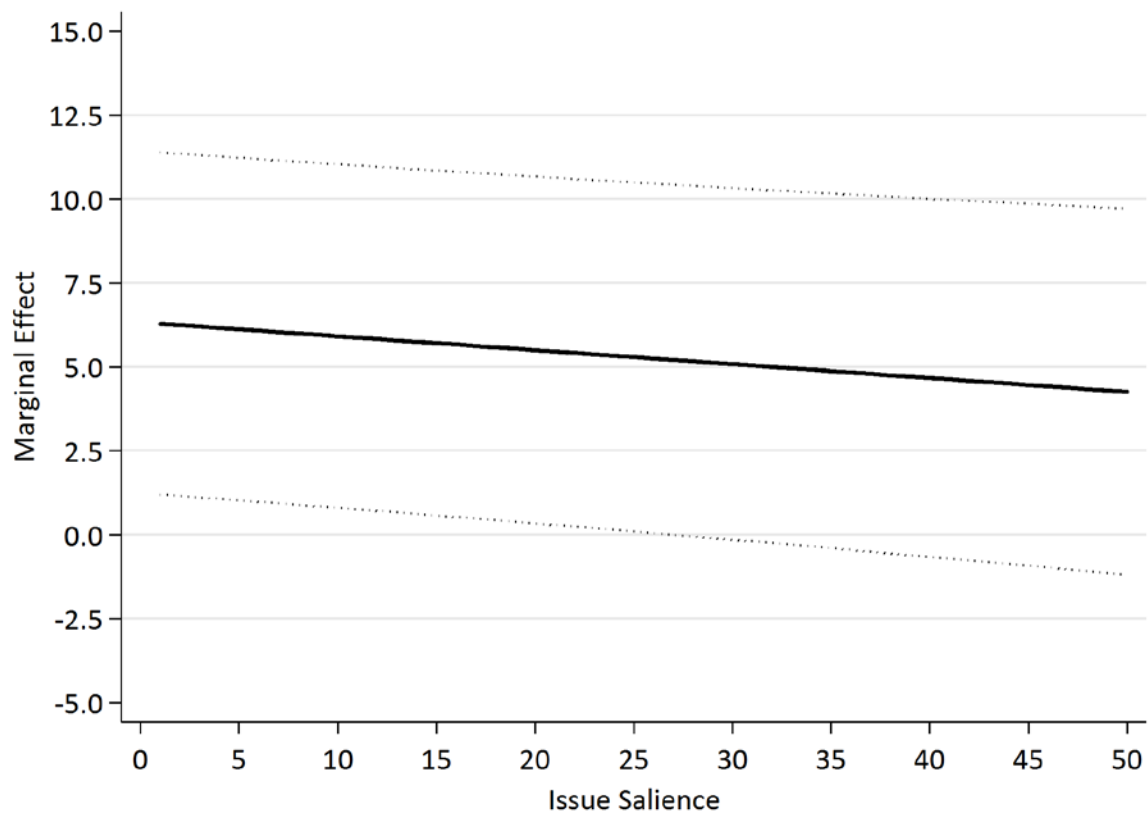
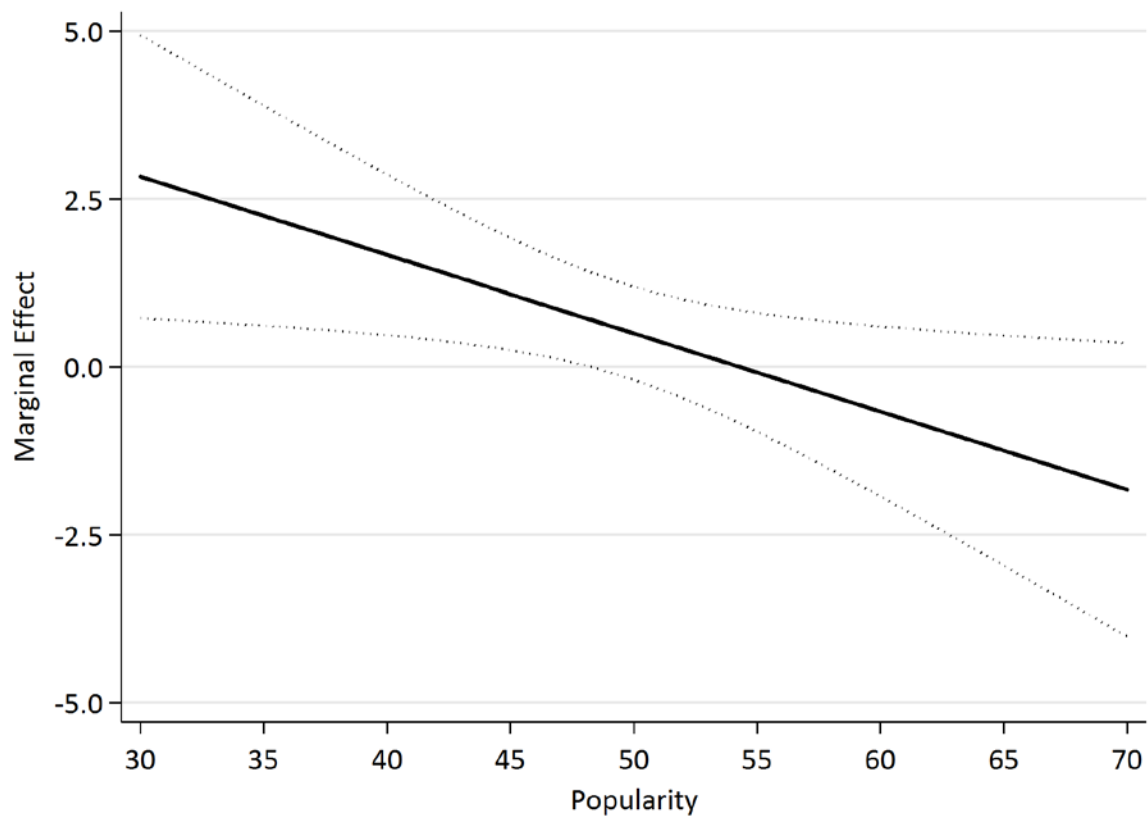


Figure 2(b). Marginal Effects of Issue Ownership for values of Popularity in Major Legislation in Congress



TABLES

Table 1. Time Series Cross-Sectional AR(1) Model of Issue Ownership and the State of the Union (President's Party)

	AGENDA _{it}			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3 (inc.fixed effects)	Model 4
Issue Ownership _{it}	0.217 (0.107)**	5.006 (1.333)***	5.425 (1.398)***	3.142 (1.107)***
Salience _{it}	0.315 (0.040)***	0.677 (0.138)***	0.970 (0.164)***	0.882 (0.152)***
Salience _{it} * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.051 (0.018)***	-0.086 (0.022)***	-0.073 (0.020)***
Popularity _t	-	0.613 (0.215)***	0.637 (0.223)***	0.419 (0.184)**
Popularity _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.091 (0.027)***	-0.094 (0.028)***	-0.048 (0.022)**
Divided _t	-	-	3.245 (1.915)*	3.036 (1.840)*
Divided _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-	-0.423 (0.272)	-0.345 (0.259)
Divided _t * Salience _{it}	-	-	-0.579 (0.211)***	-0.563 (0.200)***
Divided _t * Issue Ownership _{it} * Salience _{it}	-	-	0.070 (0.028)**	0.068 (0.027)**
Constant	6.792 (1.820)***	-24.462 (10.351)**	-27.408 (11.040)**	-20.848 (9.020)**
R-squared	0.20	0.26	0.28	0.25
N	510	510	510	510
Panels	11	11	11	11

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 2. Time Series Cross-Sectional AR(1) Model of Issue Ownership and Most Important Laws (Majority Party)

	AGENDA _{it}			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3 (inc.fixed effects)	Model 4
Issue Ownership _{it}	-0.084 (0.228)	6.413 (2.556)**	6.331 (2.599)**	2.492 (1.992)
Salience _{it}	0.160 (0.045)***	0.223 (0.087)**	0.526 (0.136)***	0.480 (0.132)***
Salience _{it} * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.008 (0.013)	-0.041 (0.019)**	-0.037 (0.017)**
Popularity _t	-	0.915 (0.388)**	0.937 (0.421)**	0.251 (0.317)
Popularity _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.125 (0.050)**	-0.117 (0.052)**	-0.039 (0.039)
Divided _t	-	-	3.612 (3.881)	5.708 (3.123)*
Divided _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-	-0.658 (0.491)	-0.843 (0.455)*
Divided _t * Salience _{it}	-	-	-0.458 (0.172)***	-0.417 (0.165)**
Divided _t * Issue Ownership _{it} * Salience _{it}	-	-	0.052 (0.024)**	0.047 (0.022)**
Constant	8.967 (2.606)***	-38.449 (19.757)*	-40.497 (20.523)**	-8.204 (15.991)
R-squared	0.26	0.25	0.27	0.25
N	452	452	452	452
Panels	11	11	11	11

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3. Time Series Cross-Sectional AR(1) Model of Issue Ownership and Acts of the UK Parliament (Majority Party)

	ACTS _{it}		
	Model 1	Model 2 (inc.fixed effects)	Model 3
Issue Ownership _{it}	-0.145 (0.081)*	0.690 (0.422)	0.640 (0.389)*
Salience _{it}	0.206 (0.033)***	0.330 (0.079)***	0.329 (0.073)***
Salience _{it} * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.017 (0.010)*	-0.017 (0.008)**
Popularity _t	-	0.132 (0.074)*	0.110 (0.067)*
Popularity _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.017 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.010)*
Constant	1.470 (3.803)	-4.098 (4.629)	0.759 (2.702)
R-squared	0.12	0.13	0.11
N	398	398	398
Panels	11	11	11

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 4. Time Series Cross-Sectional AR(1) Model of Issue Ownership and the Queen's Speech and Acts of the UK Parliament (Majority Party)

	AGENDA _{it}		
	Model 1	Model 2 (inc.fixed effects)	Model 3
Issue Ownership _{it}	-0.009 (0.088)	0.942 (0.426)**	0.877 (0.402)**
Salience _{it}	0.171 (0.030)***	0.274 (0.072)***	0.265 (0.069)***
Salience _{it} * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.008)
Popularity _t	-	0.157 (0.071)**	0.132 (0.066)**
Popularity _t * Issue Ownership _{it}	-	-0.021 (0.010)**	-0.019 (0.010)*
Constant	2.981 (2.225)	-3.223 (3.386)	-0.340 (2.734)
R-squared	0.20	0.21	0.20
N	816	816	816
Panels	22	22	22

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$