The Associative Dimension of Issue Ownership

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AUTHOR NOTE

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ABSTRACT

As it is commonly conceptualized, issue ownership is a multidimensional concept; it contains a “competence” dimension and an “associative” dimension. Yet existing operationalizations of issue ownership only tap the competence dimension. We focus on associative issue ownership: the spontaneous identification between specific issues and specific parties in the minds of voters. Based on survey evidence from Belgium, we show that the associative dimension of issue ownership can be measured, that it differs from competence issue ownership, and that it is an independent determinant of voting behavior.

The Associative Dimension of Issue Ownership

Issue ownership refers to the fact that specific political parties are, in the minds of voters, identified with specific policy issues and considered best able to deal with them. As voters have become more volatile, resorting increasingly to issue-voting, issue ownership may become, at least in many Western European countries, an important asset for parties (Thomassen 2005: 205). Issue ownership research has likewise surged, with scholars coming to rely on it to explain party competition and voting behavior (see for example: Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Bellucci 2006; Green and Hobolt 2008; van der Brug 2004).

We contend that the concept of issue ownership remains underspecified in two ways. First, many authors implicitly conflate two related, but analytically separate, dimensions. Second, scholars only tap what we call the "competence" dimension of issue ownership—whether parties are considered to be the "best" to deal with an issue—but do not measure the "associative" dimension. Associative issue ownership refers to the spontaneous identification of parties with issues in the minds of voters, regardless of whether or not voters consider the party as the most competent to deal with these issues. This association is the consequence of long-term party attention to the issue. Our aim is to demonstrate that (1) associative issue ownership exists and can be measured, and (2) it is an independent determinant of voting behavior.

Conceptualization and measurement of issue ownership

Most definitions of issue ownership form a mixture of several aspects, most often a competence aspect and an associative aspect. This approach started with the initial definitions of Petrocik (1996) and Budge and Farlie (1983a). Budge and Farlie refer to parties' "good performance" and the identification and association of specific parties with specific issues. Petrocik defines issue ownership as parties being perceived as better able to handle certain

problems. ”Handling” is defined as *“The ability to resolve a problem of concern to voters. It is a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation towards these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties… is more sincere and committed to doing something about them.”* (Petrocik 1996: 826). While “ability” arguably refers to competence in dealing with an issue, he also mentions the associative dimension when talking about a “reputation for policy and program interests”. Elsewhere, Petrocik and colleagues (2003: 601) state that the “mere association” of an issue with a party is an indicator of the party’s ability to implement superior policies and programs. Thus, Petrocik’s conceptualization mixes competence and associative dimensions. He defines issue ownership itself in terms of competence, but considers a party’s history of attention for the issue as the origin of this competence.

Subsequent authors have adopted similar conceptualizations mixing the competence and associative aspects. Damore (2004) states that issue ownership is both a perception of ability (competence) and a matter of being associated with issues. Holian (2004) puts the associative element first and the competence element second. Walgrave et al. (2009) explicitly mention the identification between issues and parties. Sides (2006) talks about the “credibility” of a party to be dedicated and committed to an issue, suggesting association. Similarly, van der Brug (2004) considers issue ownership to be a matter of the “priority” of an issue for a party. The same applies to (parts of the) definitions of Belucci (2006) and of Bélanger and Meguid (2008).

Measurement of issue ownership has been less inconsistent, though. Most authors use similar survey questions, which are almost always variations of the “best party to deal with an issue”-formulation, measuring competence only. No existing measure gauges association, although the associative aspect is an invariable part of the definition. Hence, the empirical focus on competence in survey questions does not do justice to the conceptualization of issue

ownership. Note that issue ownership studies focusing not on individual voting but on party strategies *have* used measures that reflect the associative aspect of issue ownership. For example, Budge and Farlie (1983b) and Walgrave and De Swert (2007) relied on content analysis of party manifestos to assess associative issue ownership via attention to issues.

Associative issue ownership and voting

As Petrocik (1996: 844-845) has already noted, the indicator of issue competence is correlated with partisanship, while not being a pure reflection of it. Party identifiers are inclined to name their preferred party as the most competent to deal with most issues (for evidence from Canada, see Bélanger and Meguid 2008: 483). "Best at" indicators measure not only competence, but also general evaluations of parties (van der Brug 2004). This conflation introduces possible causality issues (but see Green and Jennings, 2011 who show that what they call "macro competence" provides some non-contaminated information about general issue handling). In short, competence issue ownership may be endogenous to the vote and therefore problematic as a predictor (Kuechler 1991).

Associative issue ownership triggers "accessibility", a basic mechanism of information-processing and decision-making. Accessibility means that a bit of information comes to the top of a voter's mind, retrieved easily from memory (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Associative issue ownership draws attention to a party when thinking about an issue. When issues are salient for voters, the party-issue associations draw attention to some parties and not to others, directly linking those parties to the task at hand (voting). Aalberg and Jenssen (2007: 118) make a similar point, arguing that issue ownership—what they call "issue hegemony"—can be traced back to schema theory: issue ownership is an established link between a party and an issue that is stored in memory and affects new observations. Associative issue ownership, in sum, has cognitive effects on people's electoral decisions.

Therefore, in line with recent research (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; van der Brug 2004), we expect associative issue ownership to affect vote choice when *combined* with high issue saliency. Only if a voter attaches high importance to the issue she associates with a party will that association matter for her vote.

Data and methods

We focus on Belgium, a small European democracy characterized by strong party system fragmentation. The Belgian case yields two cases in one country, as the Flemish and Francophone party systems are separated.

We draw on two surveys. PARTIREP09 is a representative panel survey conducted about the 2009 elections in Flanders (N=908) and Wallonia (N=787). It contains only a measure of associative issue ownership. We additionally rely on a large, non-representative webpanel of Flemish voters for the same elections (UAWEP09, N=6,624) comprising measures of both associative and competence issue ownership. UAWEP09 includes five issues (environment, taxes, crime, pensions, and development aid) whereas PARTIREP09 contains ten issues (environment, taxes, crime, social security, unemployment, economic crisis, immigration, state reform, culture, and mobility). Our dependent variable is the actual vote each subject cast in the 2009 elections.

Our key independent variable, associative issue ownership, is measured as follows: "*Can you indicate for the following issue which party you spontaneously think about when you think about the issue? This does not have to be the party whose position on that issue you find most compelling*". Respondents tick one party, indicate that they do not know, or indicate that none of the parties comes to mind. For each voter and issue, each party gets a separate associative issue ownership score (0=not owner, 1= owner).

We capture competence issue ownership by the classic question: "*How suitable do you*

think each of the following parties is to deal with the issue of X?". Each party is scored by each respondent for each issue on an 11-point scale (0=completely unsuited, 10=completely suited).

We measure our theorized conditioning variable, issue salience, as follows: "*Can you indicate how important each of the following issues is when you decide who to vote for in the upcoming elections?*" Answers on a 5-point scale range from 1=very unimportant to 5=very important.

We include two control variables. First, as a proxy for party preference, we tap the general evaluation of a party: "*What do you think of the ideas of the parties? Give each party a score from 0 to 10, 0 meaning that you do not agree with its ideas and 10 meaning that you totally agree with its ideas*". Second, to capture general ideological proximity between a party and a voter, we calculate the distance between each voter's position on an 11-point left-right scale (0=entirely left, 10=entirely right) and the average left-right position of each party electorate.

Our modeling strategy is a multilevel one. We stack the dataset so that each respondent is represented by a number of issue-party combinations (e.g., socialists/environment). This approach allows us to estimate a model across issues and parties. Not interested in differential effects between voters, we employ a multilevel model for purely statistical reasons: to correct our estimates for possible errors introduced by the duplication of observations in the stacked dataset (Steenbergen and Jones 2002: 219-220). It is likely that associative issue ownership matters more for some parties and issues than for others. However, since our goal is to examine whether associative issue ownership matters in general, we stick to aggregate analyses.

Results

Results from PARTIREP09 (Table 1) show that voters do spontaneously associate specific issues with specific parties both in Flanders and in Wallonia.

[Table 1]

Few voters in the two regions are unable to give an answer—the "don't knows" are negligible. For five out of ten issues, there is an uncontested associative issue owner in both regions (environment, social security, unemployment, immigration, and taxes), which is remarkable if one considers the highly fragmented character of both party systems. In Wallonia, additionally, two other issues (economic crisis and mobility) are strongly associated with a particular party.

Results for associative ownership are largely identical when we draw on Flemish UAWEP09 data where we only have five issues but also the competence issue ownership measure (a dummy variable based on the scale measures[1]). The results for competence issue ownership are more dispersed than for associative issue ownership. For example, on the most clearly "owned" issue (environment), the Flemish greens are again the clear associative owners (95%), but their score on competence is smaller (59%) and both christian-democrats (28%) and liberals (35%) have high scores. We see then that associative and competence ownership are two separate things; parties may be considered competent but not associated with the issue, and vice versa. This point is underscored by the low correlation between the

[1] If a party has the highest score, the dummy is '1' (competence issue owner). If multiple parties have the highest score, they all get a score of '1'. However, if *all* parties receive the same score the scale obviously does not signal a clear owner, all parties score '0' on the dummy. Finally, if no party scores '5' or higher, all parties score '0' on the dummy as well. If all parties are evaluated as incompetent, the highest scoring party should not be interpreted as being the 'owner' of the issue. To test the robustness of our results, we dichotomized the competence ownership measure in various ways. This produced largely identical findings.

two measures (V=.022[2]). Using UAWEP09, we examine the correlation between the two issue ownership measures and party evaluation: whereas competence has a strong correlation (Pearson's r=0.68[3]), associative ownership has a very low correlation (V=0.05), which is confirmed in PARTIREP09 (V=0.062 in Wallonia and 0.133 in Flanders).

To what extent does associative issue ownership affect voting behavior? Table 2 presents multilevel models predicting party vote drawing on UAWEP09 data[4].

[Table 2]

Both models control for general party evaluation and ideological proximity. The controls exert the expected effects: when people like a party's ideas or are ideologically close to the party, they are more likely to vote for that party. All potential issue ownership effects occur *on top* of these strong controls[5].

[2] Correlations were calculated using the stacked dataset. Results are based on correlation between competence and associative issue ownership for each issue-party combination, up to 35 for each respondent. For correlations between ownership measures and party preference, we used the same dataset but it should be noted that party preference is constant for each respondent.

[3] Because both party evaluation and competence issue ownership were measured on an 11-point scale, we used Pearson's r for this correlation.

[4] In order to maximize the number of cases, we include all respondents for which we have at least one issue-party link. This introduces a possible bias: if certain issue-party links are more likely to be missing compared to others, the estimates could be skewed. However, when we run the same models with only those respondents for which we have all 35 issue-party links (N=3,246) we obtain the same results.

[5] Due to the pooled character of our data, other classic control variables can not be included. Given that the dependent variable is the act of voting for *any* party, it would be nonsensical to suppose that education, for example, increases the chance that one would vote for *any* party.

Model 1 includes the main effects. Competence issue ownership, not associative issue ownership, has a positive direct effect on voting, even when controlling for general party evaluation.

Model 2 includes the interaction effects with issue salience. Now, the story is just the opposite: associative issue ownership, not competence issue ownership, has a positive effect on voting in interaction with issue salience. When people consider an issue to be important *and* when they associate that issue with a party, the chances that they will vote for that party increase. This finding substantiates the idea that associative issue ownership is a distinct aspect of issue ownership with a separate effect on voting. When running the same analyses based on the PARTIREP09 dataset providing a representative sample for both regions (but lacking the competence issue ownership measure), we find that in both Flanders and Wallonia associative issue ownership affects the vote in interaction with issue salience (results not shown, but available on request). Given that our findings hold in two different party systems, we can be more confident that they are robust. To get a better sense of this, we plot the interaction effect between associative issue ownership and issue salience on vote choice (Figure 1).

[Figure 1]

This picture shows that associative issue ownership does not affect voting when the importance of an issue is low. As salience increases, the effect of associative issue ownership gradually transpires. The effect is significant starting from the middle of the salience scale. The effect is small and does not change the probability of voting for a party with more than a few percentage points; however, this interaction plots the *overall* effect of associative issue ownership across all issues and parties under study. For some issue-party combinations, the effect is likely to be small, whereas it matters a lot more for others.

Conclusion

We started from the observation that many conceptualizations of issue ownership conflate two related, but analytically different dimensions. "Associative issue ownership" is the spontaneous association between issues and parties in the minds of voters resulting from a history of attention, while "competence issue ownership" is the belief that a party is best placed to tackle the issue. Extant empirical work only measured the competence dimension. We provide the first empirical evidence distinguishing these two dimensions of issue ownership. We implemented a new survey question to gauge the associative dimension. Our analyses demonstrate that respondents spontaneously identify issues with specific parties and that these issue-party associations often differ from their assessments of parties' issue competence. Both dimensions affect voting on top of general party evaluations. Competence issue ownership has a direct effect, whereas associative issue ownership affects vote choice only when voters deem an issue to be important. This finding substantiates our claim that association and competence are distinct aspects of issue ownership.

The study has its shortcomings. We only use evidence from one country, and thus must remain cautious in generalizing our findings, although we see no *a priori* reason why Belgium would be an idiosyncratic case. Also, the study is confined to the electoral effect of associative ownership. We expect associative issue ownership to have an even larger impact on perceptions of parties; because associative issue ownership is a connection made regardless of party preference, it stands to reason that it could, more than competence ownership, act as a "filter" on how parties are perceived. Past literature contains hints that such perception effects exist (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Hayes, 2008; Petrocik et al., 2003). We leave it to others to pursue these tracks. In the meantime, this study shows that adding the associative dimension leads to a more nuanced understanding of how issue-party linkages affect party choice.

Appendix PARTIREP Survey Description

General Description

PARTIREP09 was financed by the IAP attraction pole project Partirep[6], and set out to study (changes in) the political behavior and attitudes of the Belgian voting population in the run up to the European and regional elections in 2009. In total, PARTIREP09 consisted of three subsequent waves, two pre-electoral and one post-electoral; the initial wave utilized CAPI as this was expected to yield the best response rates. Following the initial wave, two CATI waves ensued. Wave 2 of PARTIREP09 was aimed at measuring attitudes and behavior right before the elections, whereas the third and final wave was used to measure post-electoral attitudes and voting behavior. Wave 3 also included the associative issue ownership measure. The field work itself was executed by TNS Media, under supervision of the Partirep team.

Population description and sampling procedure

PARTIREP09 used an aselect sampling procedure with geographic clustering to reduce costs (e.g. traveling expenses and so forth). The populations under study were all eligible voters in the Flemish and Walloon regions. The initial sample consisted of 4363 addresses, distributed over 240 sampling points, which were extracted from the Rijksregister. Put shortly, the Rijksregister, which is the official list of all residents in Belgium, is the best source of addresses available: because the Rijksregister knows not only the age of the respondents, but also whether they were actually eligible to vote in the 2009 elections, all respondents in the initial sample were presumably eligible for participation in the survey. The

[6] IAP Attraction pole projects are aimed at promoting cooperation between several universities. The Partirep acronym is a combination of Participation and Representation – the two forces in society the project wishes to study. Five universities participate in the Project: UA (University of Antwerp), VUB (Free University of Brussels, Flemish), ULB (Free University of Brussels, French), KUL (Catholic University of Louvain), and UL (University of Leiden, the Netherlands).

Rijksregister drew an aselect sample of 17, 20 or 25 addresses for each of the 240 sampling points, which were distributed randomly across the two regions. Urban districts received more addresses to anticipate higher non response compared to more rural districts. The aim was to achieve a sample of at least 1200 Flemish and 1200 Walloon voters for the first wave. Because of low response rates (see next paragraph) an additional sample of 500 addresses was extracted from the Rijksregister on the 14th of April, 2009. These addresses were clustered in those sampling points where response was expected to remain low. These addresses were then immediately contacted in the manner described above. At the end of the first wave, respondents were asked to participate in the subsequent CATI waves.

Since both waves 2 and 3 operated largely on the same principles, they will be discussed in tandem. Both surveys had as the initial sample those respondents that participated in the first wave and agreed to participate in the follow-up telephone surveys. Respondents that refused upon contacting, or who contacted the green line and refused, were not contacted further. The initial sample for waves 2 and 3 was N=2057.

Response rates

For the first wave, a total of 2331 interviews were completed. Using the AAPOR response calculator, this equals a response rate 1 of 49%. For waves 2 and 3 the response rates were considerably higher: the initial sample size for both surveys was 2057, which resulted in 1845 completed interviews in wave 2 (AAPOR response rate 1: 90%) and 1695 completed interviews in wave 3 (AAPOR response rate 1: 83%).

Field work periods

Wave 1 field work started on February 21st (first interview was conducted on February 23rd) 2009 and ended on May 23rd, 2009. Wave 2 field work started on May 25th, 2009 and ended on June 6th, 2009. Wave 3 field work started on June 22nd, 2009 and ended on August 28th, 2009.

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Figure 1: Interaction effect of associative ownership and issue salience on the probability of voting for the party.

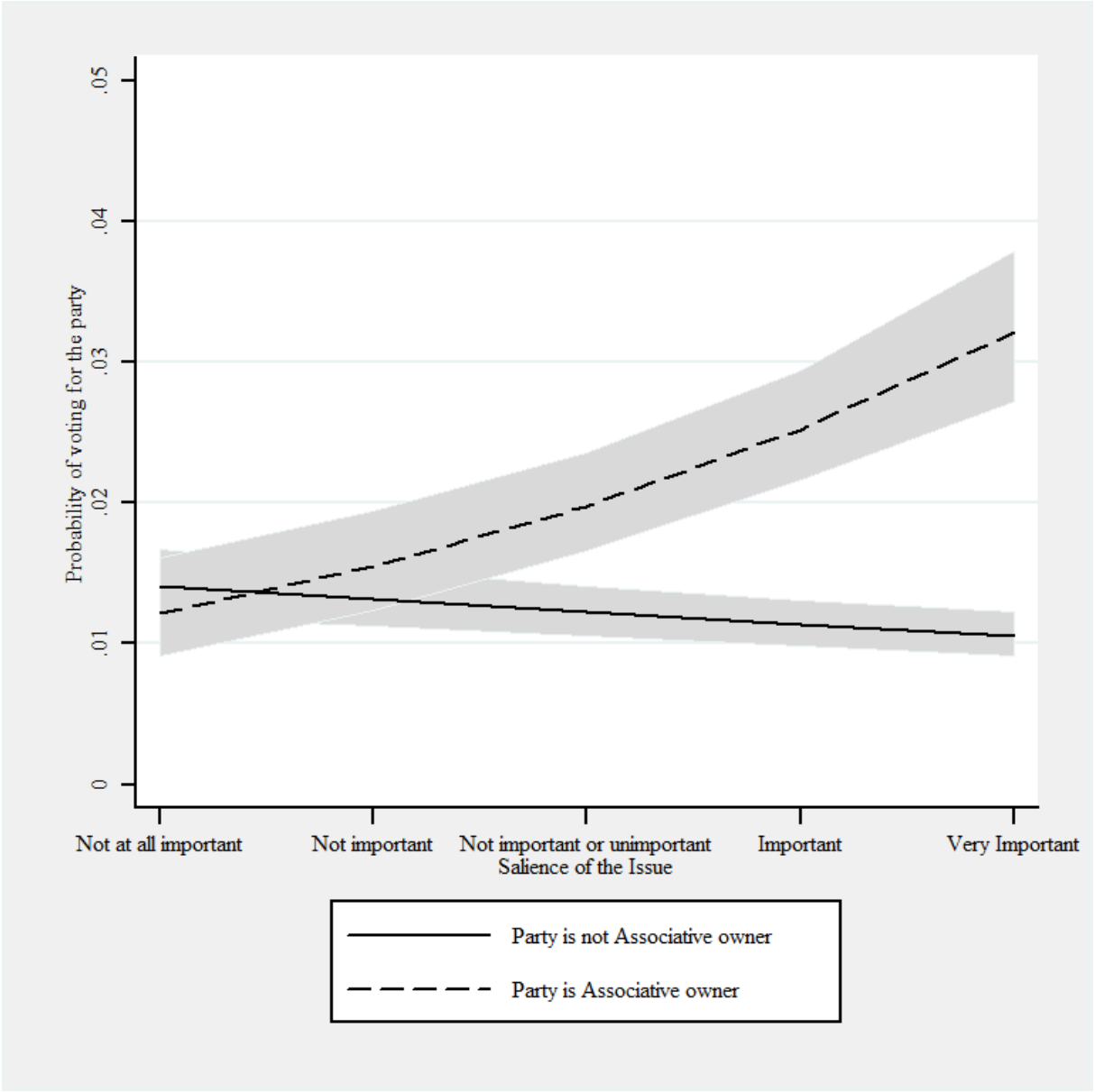

Table 1: Associative issue ownership of Flemish and Walloon parties. Table entries are weighted frequencies (in per cent) for 10 issues (PARTIREP09; data weighted for socio demographic variables and voting behavior).

	Environ-ment	Social Security	Unem-ployment	Taxes	Economic Crisis	Immigration	Crime & Justice	State Reform	Mobility	Culture
Flanders (n=908)										
Christian-democrats	3	20	17	15	29	8	23	27	18	18
Greens	**87**	0	1	1	1	3	0	0	13	9
Nationalists	2	4	4	4	6	2	4	**33**	3	7
Socialists	1	**50**	**41**	8	10	11	4	3	**27**	24
Left-liberals	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Extreme Right	1	3	4	2	3	**50**	**35**	6	1	2
Liberals	1	6	11	**45**	**30**	8	10	12	8	7
Neo-Liberals	0	1	1	4	1	2	5	1	5	0
Extreme Left	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	3	13	17	17	16	12	16	14	21	**25**
Another party	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Don’t know	1	2	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Wallonia (n=787)										
Socialists	4	**63**	**62**	13	18	**28**	**26**	14	17	17
Liberals	0	8	9	**59**	**52**	8	23	**32**	7	7
Christian-democrats	1	11	6	2	2	17	11	9	11	23
Greens	**85**	1	1	4	2	5	1	3	**36**	15
Extreme Right	0	0	1	0	0	10	3	0	0	0
None	7	12	14	15	19	21	24	26	19	**27**
Another party	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	0	0
Don’t know	3	5	7	7	7	11	11	12	10	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2: Effect of associative issue ownership (AIO) and competence issue ownership (CIO) on voting. Multilevel logistic regression models. Reported estimates are unstandardized coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses (UAWEP09)

	Model 1 Main Effects (N_i/N_j=206649/6624)		**Model 2 Interactions (N_i/N_j=206649/6624)**	
Fixed Effects				
General party evaluation	3.54	***	3.53	***
	(.03)		(.03)	
Ideological proximity	-0.38	***	-0.38	***
	(.02)		(.02)	
Competence issue ownership (CIO)	0.20	***	0.22	***
	(.01)		(.03)	
Associative issue ownership (AIO)	0.05		-0.61	***
	(.04)		(.16)	
Issue salience	-0.08	***	-0.07	
	(.02)		(.06)	
CIO * Issue salience			-0.00	
			(.01)	
AIO * Issue salience			0.17	***
			(.04)	
Intercept	-28.71	***	-28.73	***
	(.28)		(.34)	
Random Effects				
Level 2 (respondent) variance	1.88		1.88	
	(.05)		(.05)	
Log likelihood	-27352.91		-27343.88	

Note: *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001.

Note: Associative Issue Ownership is coded 1 if the party is an owner, 0 if it is not.