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What can a party say? How parties' communication can influence voters' issue ownership perceptions

Abstract

Research has documented that issue ownership is an important aspect of voter behaviour. Therefore, issue ownership is an important asset for parties and one that they might try to improve on in order to enhance their electoral chances. Using survey experiments on a representative sample of Danish voters, the paper investigates what messages a party can convey to voters in order to improve its issue ownership – communicating its emphasis on the issue, its position on the issue, its links to the issue constituency, or its performance on the issue – across both valence and position issues. The results show the effectiveness of the latter two communication strategies thereby documenting that parties through their communication may affect voters' perceptions of their issue handling competencies.

Keywords: Issue ownership, issue emphasis, party constituencies, party strategies, party communications.

Highlights:

- We test experimentally what parties may communicate to improve on their issue ownership
- Communication about constituency linkages positively affects issue ownership
- The same holds for communication about issue performance
- Issue ownership perceptions thereby seem malleable

The concept of issue ownership has featured prominently in recent scholarship on party competition (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2013; Geys, 2012; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Meguid, 2005; Meyer and Müller, 2013; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009) and voting behaviour (e.g., Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Wright, 2012). Issue ownership appears as both an explanation of parties' campaign activities and voters' choices: parties are seen to campaign more on owned issues because voters are seen to vote for parties that own salient issues (cf. also Budge and Farlie, 1983, p. 282). As such, the concept seems to hold out great importance to contemporary electoral outcomes and parties seem well-advised to pay heed to voters' perceptions of issue ownership when planning their campaigns.

But a developing line of research (e.g., Brasher, 2009; Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Holian, 2004; Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009) suggests that parties are able to do more than merely adjust to the extant configuration of issue ownership perceptions. Thus, they seem capable of influencing such perceptions, thereby further enhancing their potential for success in campaigns. However, at present our knowledge about what it is in parties' communication that most effectively influences voters' perceptions is limited. Therefore, this paper focuses on exactly this puzzle about what strategies parties can pursue in their (campaign and other) communication to voters in order to change voters' perceptions about them on a given issue.

Extant scholarship in the field (see above) has investigated only one or two communicative strategies that parties may pursue to affect issue ownership perceptions – such as emphasizing or re-framing issues – and that often for only one issue at a time. In contrast, based on a discussion of the stability of issue ownership, this article outlines four different strategies – four types of information – that parties may be able to use to

influence voters' attributions of ownership, including two that have not been examined before (the latter ones): emphasising a given issue, presenting their position on an issue, highlighting their connections with specific constituencies and advertising their performance towards agreed-upon policy goals. Following the vast majority of work in the field, the analyses are focused on so-called 'competence issue ownership' (cf. Walgrave et al. 2012), i.e., the dimension of ownership that has to do with voters' perception of parties' capacities for 'handling' given issues.

The feasibility of the strategies is assessed by means of an experimental research design implemented in Denmark, a small multi-party system with a low electoral threshold and, consequently, a relatively high number of parties represented in parliament (nine in the relevant period). The analyses show that particularly two of the four types of information appear effective; constituency connections as well as performance records, that is. Communication containing both these types of information, thus, appears able to improve voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership. This, as well as the comprehensive selection of possible party strategies and issues investigated, constitutes the main contribution of the paper.

1 The (in)stability of issue ownership

The idea of issue ownership originates in work by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996). Both of these seminal contributions agree on defining issue ownership as a perception among voters that a given party 'is more dependable in carrying out the desired objective' (Budge and Farlie, 1983, p. 287) or 'better able to "handle"' a given problem (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826; cf. also Petrocik et al., 2003, p. 601).

The two seminal studies also tend towards agreeing issue ownership being a stable phenomenon. Thus, Budge and Farlie (1983, pp. 289-90; emphasis added) talk about 'issues that are *always*, on balance, favourable to the left' or 'the bourgeois parties'.

Petrocik (1996, p. 826) similarly states that ‘Perceptions of a party’s issue competence probably change very slowly, when they change at all’ (see also Norpoth and Buchanan, 1992). The position is more nuanced, though, in his later contribution (Petrocik et al., 2003, p. 602) where it is stated that ‘Issue-handling reputations are not eternal or even invariant’. But still ‘There is a stable and long-term equilibrium to issue-handling reputations’ (op.cit., p. 603). Whereas there is more variation for ‘Performance-issue reputations’ which ‘can be gained and lost in a short period of time’, this equilibrium is particularly pronounced on what is termed ‘Constituency-based issues’, i.e. issues linked to the parties traditional social basis (Petrocik, 1996, p. 827; we return to the distinction between ‘performance’ and ‘constituency-based issues’ below).

Other studies have, on the other hand, been more focused on the variability in issue ownerships. First of all, a considerable amount of over time-variation in issue ownership perceptions has been documented in a number of countries (e.g., Brasher, 2009; Christensen et al., 2015; Goul Andersen and Hansen, 2013; Green and Jennings, 2012; Martinsson, 2009; Meyer and Müller, 2013; Pope and Woon, 2009). Among the causes of this variation, Green and Jennings (2012) find evidence of the impact of events, such as economic shocks, as well as the cost of ruling on what they term ‘macro-competence’, a sort of general, non-issue specific ‘issue’ ownership perception. Further, a number of studies (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Brasher, 2009; Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Holian, 2004; Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009; cf. also Meguid, 2005) have documented the influence of various forms of party rhetoric (e.g., framing or emphasizing issues in communication) on ownership perceptions. Finally, in line with Petrocik’s idea of a more volatile performance-based issue ownership, some – although weaker than expected – support has been found for the idea that parties’ ability to deliver desired policy outcomes also

influences voters' ownership perceptions (Bélanger, 2003; Brasher, 2009; Egan, 2013; Martinsson, 2009, pp. 143-4; cf. also Stubager and Slothuus, 2013).

Hence, all of these studies share the view that issue ownership is volatile at least to some degree, just as they point out that parties have some leverage over the voters' perceptions of their issue handling capacities – a leverage that is at least partly due to their communication. It therefore seems worthwhile to examine in more detail what it is in parties' communication that may influence (competence) ownership perceptions. What, in other words, can parties say to voters in order to improve on their issue ownership?

The studies mentioned point to several types of information that parties may relay to voters. First, parties may simply emphasise issues. Second, they may advertise their policy positions on positional issues in the hope of gaining issue ownership among voters with similar positions. Third, they can highlight their association with specific constituencies. Finally, they can inform voters about their performance on valence issues. We now discuss each of the strategies in more detail rounding off with considerations of their limitations.

1.1 Emphasizing issues

The idea that parties' attention to or emphasis on issues is important in influencing issue ownership perceptions is central in Petrocik's (1996, p. 826) work. Thus, he sees issue ownership as 'produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties ... is more sincere and committed to doing something about them.' This lead has been followed up empirically most directly in studies by Walgrave and co-authors (Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009). Using both observational and experimental data from Belgium, these studies have documented how a party's communication on specific

issues is able to persuade voters to accord issue ownership to the party – at least for non-monopolized issues and over the shorter run. Based on a survey experiment, Dahlberg and Martinsson (2015) find similar results in Sweden as does Brasher (2009) for the US, although the measures of party communication used in her longitudinal, observational study are considerably more indirect (op.cit., p. 79; see also Meguid, 2005).

The focus on issue emphasis can also be found in van der Brug's (2004) study of the influence of issue ownership perceptions on party choice in the Netherlands. In that study, issue ownership is consciously defined as voters' perception of how important issues are to parties (op.cit., p. 215). This is also the logic underlying Walgrave, Lefevere and Tresch's (2012) distinction between two dimensions of issue ownership – 'competence' and 'association'. Whereas the former is identical to the way issue ownership is understood here (as well as in most other studies), 'Associative issue ownership refers to the spontaneous identification of parties with issues in the minds of voters, regardless of whether voters consider the party to be the most competent to deal with these issues; it is the consequence of long-term party attention to the issue.' (op.cit., p. 772). Even though the authors conceptualize the associative dimension as separate from the core, competence aspect of issue ownership, it might be expected that a party seen as associated with an issue can gain from this in terms of acquiring ownership over it also in the competence sense in focus here (cf. Wagner and Zeglovits, 2014). On the basis of these studies, we formulate H1 as the expectation that parties can improve their ownership over issues in the eye of the voters by communicating to voters that they place emphasis on them.

1.2 Highlighting positions on issues

Extant research into the individual-level roots of issue ownership has documented that voters' perceptions are influenced by their attitudes so that voters tend to accord issue ownership to parties with which they agree. This has been documented for both Italian and British voters by Bellucci (2006, pp. 563-4) and Sanders et al. (2011) just as Stubager and Slothuus (2013) have reached a similar conclusion for Danish voters (cf. also Kuechler, 1991, p. 82; Pardos-Prado, 2012, p. 351; Wagner and Zeglovits, 2014). On the issue of foreign policy in the US, Gadarian (2010) also emphasizes the importance of the position-component of issue ownership and shows that parties can win votes by taking a more hawkish position if the foreign policy environment is threatening. These results seem to indicate that parties should be able to improve their ownership over an issue among voters if they highlight their policy position when communicating to voters. Notably, however, this effect should only be present among voters who agree with the party's position. Among voters who disagree, the party might expect the opposite effect. This conditional expectation is H2 and it obviously only applies to issues discussed in positional terms – i.e., where there is disagreement about policy goals (cf. Stokes, 1963; 1992).

1.3 Highlighting party constituency connections

Despite their prominent role in Petrocik's (1996, p. 827; Petrocik et al., 2003, pp. 602-3) conception of issue ownership, it is only recently that research has begun to address the influence of voters' perceptions of parties' constituencies on issue ownership perceptions. In the first study to include the variable, thus, Stubager and Slothuus (2013) have documented that such perceptions do play an important role to issue ownership in the sense that parties seen as representing groups (e.g., the lowest income groups) associated with a given issue (e.g., redistribution) are more likely to own the issue. In the same vein, Petrocik et al. (2003, p. 602) note that 'A party can lose an

advantage on a constituency-based issue when major shifts occur in the party coalitions.’ Similarly, Pope and Woon (2009, p. 657) conclude that ‘even constituency-based reputations are far from settled quantities’. This gives rise to the expectation that parties should be able to enhance their ownerships in voters’ perceptions by alerting voters to their constituency linkages (H3).¹

1.4 Communicating performance

Last, but by no means least, parties may also attempt to improve issue ownership perceptions by informing voters about their performance on valence issues. Valence issues are what Petrocik (1996, p. 827; Petrocik et al., 2003, pp. 602-3) refers to as ‘performance issues’ on which there is general agreement about the overall policy goals (cf. Stokes 1963; 1992).² On such issues, hence, parties may point to past and/or present actions directed towards solving problems like unemployment or fiscal instability – or merely positive developments in such issue areas – as arguments for their superior handling capacity, i.e., their ownership of a given issue. In a sense, this type of information would seem most directly relevant to Petrocik’s (1996, p. 826) idea of issue ownerships as reflecting parties’ abilities to ‘handle’ problems of concern to voters.

¹ Such communication and/or policy may or may not involve aspects of the other strategies discussed. The crucial aspect is the targeting towards the relevant groups – a feature that is not a necessary part of, e.g., changing the party’s policy position. See also below about the interrelations of the strategies.

² Some authors (e.g., Bellucci, 2006; Egan, 2013; van der Brug, 2004) seem to restrict the use of issue ownership to valence issues. However, we follow Petrocik and Pardos-Pardo in seeing the concept as applicable to both valence and position issues – although not in the same way.

Further, the relevance of performance considerations to ownership perceptions is confirmed both at the individual level by Stubager and Slothuus (2013) and at the aggregate level by Egan (2013). We can, hence, formulate H4 as the expectation that parties may improve such ownerships in the voters' eyes by communicating their performance to voters.

However, while there may be agreement about the ultimate policy goals on valence issues, the choice of means to reach the consensually agreed-upon goals can be all but consensual (Pardos-Prado, 2012, p. 344). Thus, voters' may hold different preferences for problem-solving approaches and such differences may condition the effect of information about parties' performance on ownership considerations. To take an example: If a party has succeeded in lowering unemployment by decreasing benefits for the unemployed, thereby forcing them to take up jobs in other trades or further away geographically, voters preferring to, e.g., provide extra training for the unemployed as a way to reduce unemployment, may not perceive the party as good at handling the unemployment issue in spite of the drop in unemployment. This line of argument leads to the conditional expectation that information about performance only has positive effects on ownership perceptions among voters who prefer the problem-solving approach chosen by the party. Among those who disagree with the choice of approach, the effect may even be negative; this is H5.

It should be noted that there is a connection between hypotheses two and five that are both based on the same basic, positional logic. This reflects the fact that the positional logic may be invoked depending upon how valence issues are framed (cf. Pardos-Prado, 2012, p. 344). Given the existence of an agreed upon goal for the overarching valence issue, however, we have opted to keep H2 and H5 separate in the discussion, but this is not meant to imply that the underlying logic is fundamentally different.

1.5 On the limits to parties' strategic behaviour

As noted, parties do not exist in isolation; hence, there are limits to the effectiveness of the four strategies. Three factors, in particular, are relevant to mention. First, for most purposes the parties depend on the media to communicate their messages to the voters. Since the media are said to 'index' the behaviour of parties (Bennet, 1990; cf. also Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010), this may not be that much of a problem, particularly for larger parties, but it is a potential limitation to keep in mind. Even more problematic may be to get voters to perceive party communication as more than cheap talk. Thus, Norpoth and Buchanan (1992) suggest that it takes more than an election campaign to convince voters of a change in issue emphasis. One would expect the chances hereof to improve over time, however (cf. also Petrocik, 1996, p. 826).

Second, the reactions of other parties may also pose problems. Were a given party to pursue one of the strategies outlined above it is possible that one or more other parties would seek to counteract the effects hereof. Indeed, as noted by Geys (2012; cf. also Meguid, 2005) in the context of competition for votes, but equally applicable here, the focus on a given issue by one party risks providing benefits also for other, competing parties. Such risks are integral to party competition. As such, they are risks that parties have to live with. The design presented below, unfortunately, does not take this aspect into account. Consequently, the results are premised on the strategic behaviour being successful in the sense that preventive actions by and/or inadvertent benefits for other parties do not offset any positive effects for the party pursuing a given strategy. The results of Dahlberg and Martinsson (2015) and Walgrave et al. (2009) lend some credence to this assumption in that they show that even when counter argued parties are able to increase ownership perceptions through communication. Nevertheless, this limitation should be kept in mind.

Third, there is also limits to how much room for manoeuvre parties have *vis-à-vis* voters. Thus, parties should not be able to improve their issue ownerships merely by saying things of the kind discussed above to voters. What we are suggesting, rather, is that parties – by strategically referring to actions they have taken either recently (e.g., contributed towards lowering unemployment) or over a longer period (e.g., put emphasis on a given issue) – can affect issue ownership perceptions. It is not, thus, the communication alone that does the trick, but communication focusing voters’ attention on specific aspects of parties’ behaviour. This means that party communication will have to build credibly upon their previous behaviour (cf. also Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). Were a party, e.g., to associate itself with a group to which it has never paid any attention before, it is likely that voters would perceive the party as disingenuous, thereby undercutting the effectiveness of the strategy. Likewise, successful pursuit of issue ownership would seem to presuppose that a given message doesn’t openly conflict with other aspects of a party’s behaviour. This has important implications for the design of our study that we will return to below.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the possible interconnections among the strategies. E.g., the highlighting of a given policy position may, if appropriately targeted, also enhance the party’s connections with a specific constituency group, thereby exerting double influence (see also Meguid, 2005). Indeed, it should be expected that the effectiveness of the strategies is enhanced when they are pursued in a coordinated fashion. However, we should underline that the strategies are neither theoretically nor empirically interdependent; i.e. they can function in isolation from one another.

2 Experimental design

A key challenge in testing the five hypotheses is to produce a design which ensures that voters are actually subjected to party communication of the theoretically relevant types. To meet this requirement, we employ an experimental design with five separate sets of experiments consisting of a total of 10 experiments. In each of these, we ask a treatment group to evaluate a party's capacity for handling a given issue based on information about the party framed according to our hypotheses while a control group is asked to do the same only without any information about the party. Through random assignment, we know that any difference in the evaluation between the two groups can only be ascribed to the difference in party communication.

The experiments were embedded in an online survey fielded 1-12 November 2015 by the polling company *Epinion* using a representative sample of the Danish population (N = 2,014, response rate 96 per cent). Respondents were drawn using stratified (on gender, age and education) random sampling from *Epinion's* so-called 'Denmark panel' which is a standing panel of some 240,000 respondents from which participants for a given survey can be randomly sampled. Respondents are recruited onto the panel from surveys of randomly drawn samples conducted either online or over the phone with special measures taken to recruit specific hard-to-get groups. Respondents cannot join the panel at will. Each of the hypotheses were tested on two to four combinations of issues and parties, but each respondent only encountered a given party once per hypothesis. The survey only contained items from the study reported here and in order to minimize question order effects, most parties only appeared once in the survey.³

³ The only exception is the Liberals that appeared in either Experiment 3 or 4 as well as in Experiment 7. However, given that allocation to all experiments was fully randomized

2.1 Issues and issue ownership measure

The analysis encompasses four strategically selected issues: the economy, unemployment, taxation, and refugees. Following the discussion about valence and position issues above, the selection is intended to include issues presented in ways that highlight either of the two logics. Thus, on the one hand given the way the items about the economy and unemployment are phrased (see below), they are considered valence issues in the sense that most voters and parties are expected to agree on the goals of having a solid, well-functioning economy and low unemployment. Where disagreement might arise, however, is over the means to achieve these ends – a topic to which we return below. Policies with regard to taxation and refugees are less consensual, on the other hand. On these issues, voters may (and do as shown below) disagree, e.g., over whether taxes should be increased or decreased for high incomes or over how many refugees to accept into the country.

As noted, we focus on the competence dimension of issue ownership. But what does it mean for a party to ‘own’ an issue? And how should we measure it in a multiparty system? According to Petrocik (1996, p. 826), a party owns an issue when it is seen as ‘better able to “handle”’ problems in the area. ‘Handling’, thus, is at the core of the concept. But which party, then, is best at ‘handling’ an issue? In a two-party system such as the US and UK ones where the issue ownership concept was developed, the task of deciding which party is the issue owner is relatively simple: either it is Party A or it is Party B. In multiparty systems, however, multiple parties can have credible claims to being best at handling an issue and certainly among voters perceptions may be

this should not have implications for the results. See the online appendix for all details on the set-up of the experiments.

more varied.⁴ Hence, to assess the functioning of issue ownership in multiparty systems, it is necessary to use a rating rather than a ranking approach so that the perceived handling capacity for the individual party can be determined. While this approach does not necessarily produce one single issue owner it is, in our view, a more realistic and hence valid approach. It is also, we should note, the approach chosen by recent studies in the field that are also conducted in multiparty systems (see Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015, p. 824; Walgrave et al. 2009, p. 163).

Consequently, the exact items used to tap voters' issue ownership perceptions – i.e. the dependent variables in the analyses – ran as follows: 'In your opinion, how good or bad do you think party X is at handling issue Y?' The response categories were 'Very good', 'Good', 'Neither good nor bad', 'Bad', 'Very bad' as well as a 'Don't know'-option. In the analyses, the latter option has been excluded.⁵ Hence, for each party on each issue, issue ownership is measured on a 0-4 scale where a higher score indicates stronger issue ownership.

The selection of parties and issues to include in experimental designs like ours usually involves a trade-off between considerations of external and internal validity. To maximise external validity, one would seek to use combinations of issues and parties that are not only realistic (i.e., Party A could realistically take a given position on issue X), but are also relevant in the sense that the issue is not a peripheral one. This approach, however, runs the risk of jeopardizing the internal validity of the experiment. Thus, exactly because an issue-party combination is realistic and non-

⁴ In fact, this may also apply in two-party systems where ownership perceptions may be evenly split on some issues.

⁵ The share of 'Don't know'-answers hovers between 8.2 and 29.2 per cent. Including these respondents in the analysis does not change the results.

peripheral, internal validity can be threatened by pre-treatment effects implying that even those respondents who are not provided with a given stimulus (e.g., about the position of Party A on issue X) will have this information present in memory and use it when they evaluate the issue ownership of the party on the issue. In this case, the experiment would not show an effect of the stimulus even though it exists (see also Slothuus, 2015).

We face a similar choice, only in our situation we have to prioritize external over internal validity. Thus as discussed above, our theoretical claim entails that parties, in their communication, can draw attention to previous actions in order to improve voters' perceptions of their issue ownership. For us to be able to show this, we therefore have to rely on combinations of issues and parties that are realistic in the sense that there is something to appeal to for a given party on a given issue. This has the implication that our design becomes vulnerable to pre-treatment effects, but it also implies that the design is conservative in nature since the pre-treatment should work against finding support for our expectations. To the extent that we do, hence, we can have more confidence in the results. We should note that the external validity of our study is further enhanced by the fact that we are using only real information (e.g., quotes from party leaders or performance information). The experiments do not, that is, involve deception.⁶

⁶ Unfortunately, we did not include measures of respondents' prior knowledge in our study. Therefore, it is not possible for us to investigate whether our stimulus material works as a reminder of already existing knowledge among respondents or as a source of new information. We should note, however, that since the party-constituency linkages included in the design (cf. below) are rather well-known, the positive result for those experiments suggest that a least some element of reminding is going on.

2.2 Stimulus Material

The first hypothesis on information about a party's emphasis of issues is tested in the first set of experiments. In the first experiment we present the randomly selected treatment group with the following information:

“Political parties prioritize political questions differently. In the political debate, the Socialist People's Party often emphasize unemployment. The party leader, Pia Olsen Dyhr, has for instance recently said that jobs ‘is one of the concerns that we pay the most attention to’. Considering that the Socialist People's Party often puts emphasis on unemployment, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling this issue?”

The quote is copied from a recent public speech by the party leader. The control group is simply asked to rate the party's ownership of the issue using the general item presented above – i.e., without the quote and the reminder about the party's issue emphasis. The hypothesis is also tested in three parallel, but separate experiments about the Conservatives on taxation, the Liberals on the economy, and the Liberals on refugees (see question wording and randomization information for all experiments in the online appendix).

The second hypothesis on information about a party's position on an issue is tested in the third set of experiments which contains two individual experiments. In the first of these, we give the control group the standard question presented above and the treatment group the following question:

“Political Parties have different opinions about taxation. In recent years, the Liberals have for instance advocated for lowering the tax

rate. Considering that the Liberals in recent years have advocated for lowering the tax rate, how good or bad do you think it is at handling taxation?

We run a separate, but parallel experiment about the Social Liberals on refugees highlighting that, in recent years, it has advocated for Denmark receiving more refugees. To assess the conditionality, driven by respondents' own positions, involved in the hypothesis, respondents were asked (at the beginning of the interview, i.e., before the experiments) to indicate whether the tax rate should be increased, decreased or stay the same, and whether Denmark should receive more, less or the same number of refugees⁷. Those that preferred, respectively, an unchanged tax-level or the same number of refugees were excluded from this part of the analysis together with the 'Don't know' category.

The third hypothesis focuses on information about a party's link to an issue constituency. It is tested in a parallel fashion in the second set which also contains two experiments. In the first of these, we give the control group the general question presented above while the treatment group receives the following question:

“Political parties are often seen as representing different groups in society. The Red-Green Alliance is for instance by some seen as representatives of the lowest income groups when taxation is being debated. Considering that the Red-Green Alliance is seen by some to

⁷ 11.5 per cent preferred an increase in taxes, 27.9 per cent preferred a decrease in taxes, and 56.1 per cent preferred an unchanged tax-level. 25.3 per cent preferred more refugees, 41.6 per cent preferred fewer refugees, and 27.1 per cent preferred an unchanged level of refugees.

represent the lowest income groups when taxation is being debated,
how good or bad do you think the party is at handling taxation?”

In a separate experiment, we ask a similar question about the Liberal Alliance on taxation highlighting that it is seen by some to represent the well-off.

The fourth hypothesis on information about a party’s performance on an issue was tested on two issues – unemployment and the budget in the fourth set which includes only one experiment although with two treatment groups compared to one control group. Thus, the first treatment group got the following question:

“Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle an issue.

While the Social Democrats were in government, the unemployment rate decreased from 225,000 persons to 182,000 persons according to figures from Statistics Denmark. Considering, that the unemployment rate decreased while the Social Democrats were in government, how good or bad to you think the Social Democrats are at handling unemployment?”

The other treatment group received similar information, although about the balance of the budget, where the group was told that while the Social Democrats were in government, the public budget improved from a deficit of 14.5 billion DKK in the last quarter of 2011 to a surplus of 12.4 billion DKK in the last quarter of 2014. They were then asked to rate the Social Democrats on balancing the budget. The control group received no information, but answered the general questions about both balancing the budget and fighting unemployment (as well as handling the economy, cf. below).

The test of H5 was slightly more complicated. Thus, to assess the expectation that issue ownership perceptions may be conditioned on pursuing voters’

preferred problem-solving approaches, we focused on two overarching issues, the economy and unemployment. For the former, we posited two approaches: Fighting unemployment and balancing the budget⁸ and solicited respondents' preferences over them by asking the following item at the beginning of the survey: 'Which of the following two things do you think are the most important for the Danish economy in the current situation? Balancing the budget or fighting unemployment?' The item also included a 'Don't know'-category that has been excluded from the analysis (40 per cent preferred balancing the budget and 53 per cent fighting unemployment and the rest did not choose).

The test then proceeded in two steps. First, using the fourth set of experiments described above we examined whether performance on one of the two approaches affected issue ownership perceptions on the economy. We did so by asking a follow-up question to the questions about the Social Democrats' ownership of unemployment and balancing the budget presented above. After the question on unemployment, e.g., we asked:

“The unemployment rate is very important for the Danish economy.

Considering that the unemployment rate decreased while the Social democrats were in government, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling the Danish economy?”

As usual, the control group was just asked about the Social Democrats' handling of the economy without any additional information provided. Parallel items were asked of respondents who received information about the improvement of the budget. This

⁸ The approaches are chosen to represent, respectively, a left and a right-wing approach to solving the underlying problem.

approach permits an evaluation of the degree to which performance on a given problem-solving approach carries over to the overarching issue unconditional on respondents preferred approach.

The conditional expectation of H5 is tested in the second step where responses to both the items about handling unemployment or balancing the budget and the follow-up about the economy are broken down by problem-solving preferences. H5 is supported if any increase in handling of the economy comes mainly from those preferring the approach on which the Social Democrats have delivered according to the information provided as stimulus. By way of example, thus, we would expect to see that only respondents who prefer fighting unemployment as the approach to the economy would increase their ownership ratings of the Social Democrats when informed that unemployment has been reduced during the party's time in government. Respondents preferring to balance the budget should not respond in this way since the party has not used the approach favoured by these respondents.

We used a similar setup (but different respondents) in the fifth and final set of experiments (again containing one experiment with two treatment and one control group(s)) pertaining to the overarching issue of unemployment. Here, we posited the problem-solving approaches contained in the following item asked at the beginning of the survey: 'In your opinion, which of the two following methods is best for fighting unemployment? To provide continued education to the unemployed so that they can find a new job or to make it less attractive to be on unemployment benefits so that the unemployed to a greater extent will look for a job?' (64.3 per cent preferred continued education and 29.9 per cent to make it less attractive to be on unemployment benefits; the item also included a 'Don't know'-category that has been excluded from the analysis). In the experiment, the first treatment group was provided information that the Social Democrats while in government had allocated an extra 250 mill DKK to

continued education of the unemployed. The second treatment group was provided information that the Social Democrats had voted in favour of shortening the period during which the unemployed can receive benefits from four to two years.

We then followed the same analytical two-step strategy as for the economy in first inspecting the degree to which performance on a given approach (continued education or making it less attractive to be on benefits) carries over to the ownership perceptions on the overarching issue (fighting unemployment) unconditional on which approach respondents prefer. Second, we inspected the conditional results which is where support for H5 should be manifest, e.g., from finding that only respondents who favour continued education as a strategy for fighting unemployment will respond with higher ownership ratings to information that the party has provided funds for such education. A complete overview of the experiments and randomization can be found in the online appendix.

3 Results

Hypothesis one is tested in Figure 1 which reports the rating of, e.g., the Socialist People's Party on unemployment in Panel A for the control group ("No emphasis") that does not receive information about the party's priority of the issue, and the treatment group ("Emphasis") that does receive such information. The heights of the bars hardly differ in each of the four figures and only in one situation with the Liberals on refugees (Panel D) does the provision of information on the party's priority of the issue enhance its issue ownership in a statistically significant way. According to this evidence thus, a party does not seem to be able to improve on its issue ownership by communicating its priority of the issue to the electorate.

[Figure 1]

It could be, however, that such information is only appreciated by those who are positively disposed towards the party. As a simple way to test this, we condition the results by whether respondents would vote for a party in the same political block as the party in question where the parties are divided into the two traditionally competing blocks in Danish politics, the left (i.e., the Social Democrats, the Social Liberals, the Socialist People's Party, the Red-Green Alliance and the Alternative) and the right (the Liberals, the Conservatives, the Liberal Alliance and the Danish People's Party).

The conditional results are reported in the appendix (Figure A1). As would be expected, the Liberals and the Conservatives are generally rated much higher among those who vote right and the Socialist People's Party is rated much higher among those who vote left. In spite of these, fully expected, main effects, there appears to be nothing to report. Thus, only in two cases does it make a difference to the effect of the manipulation on issue ownership perceptions which block a respondent would vote for. While the analysis shows that those who would vote right rated the Liberals higher on refugees when told about their high priority of the issue, the effect is the opposite for the Socialist People's Party on unemployment where those who would vote left rated the party lower when told about its high priority of the issue. Only in the latter case is this effect statistically significantly different from the effect among those that voted right.⁹ Hence, the conclusion does not change when taking the respondents' party support into consideration, and H1, therefore has to be rejected.

Hypothesis two is tested in Figure 2 which reports the rating of, e.g., the Liberals on taxation in Panel A for the control group ("No position") that does not

⁹ Using party identification as the conditioning factor does not change the results (not reported).

receive information about the party's position on the issue, and the treatment group ("Position") that does receive such information. As with H1 on information about a party's priority of the issue, information about a party's position on the issue does not seem to matter to its ownership rating. The bars in Figure 2 do not really differ. As discussed, it could be argued that such effect is only present among those that agree with the party's policy on the issue, i.e., those who want taxes down like the Liberals or want more refugees like the Social Liberals. However, the results do not suggest this to be the case (reported in Figure A2 in the online appendix). Voters' reaction to information about a party's position on an issue does not differ systematically between those who agree with the party and those who do not. Hence, we have to reject H2.

[Figure 2]

Hypothesis three is tested in Figure 3 which reports the rating of, e.g., the Red-Green Alliance on taxes in Panel A for the control group ("No constituency") that does not receive information about the party's constituency link on the issue, and the treatment group ("Constituency") that does receive such information. In support of H3, when reminded about a party's link to a constituency on the issue, voters rate the party substantially and significantly higher on the issue ownership measure in each of the two conditions (panels A and B in Figure 3). This effect of getting information about a party's constituency link on issue ownership perceptions is not conditioned by respondents' voting preferences (reported in Figure A3 in the online appendix).¹⁰ This is in fact highly interesting information: by providing information on its representation of a relevant constituency, a party can not only improve on its ratings among its own

¹⁰ Using party identification as the conditioning factor does not change the results (not reported).

voters, but also among voters that normally vote for the opposite side of the political spectrum. This result further strengthens H3.

[Figure 3]

The test of H4 is reported in panels A and C of Figure 4 which reports the ownership rating of the Social Democrats on unemployment (panel A) and balancing the budget (panel C). In both cases, the control group (“No performance”) receives no information about the party’s performance on the issue in contrast to the treatment group (“Performance”) that receives information about the unemployment rate in panel A (and B) and the balance of the budget in panel C (and D). The diverging heights of the bars in panels A and C document that respondents rate parties markedly and systematically higher when they receive information about recent strong performance by the party. The effect is quite substantial and the evaluations of the party improve by 0.53-0.55 points on the 0-4 scale. This is in clear support of H4.

Panels B and D of Figure 4 contain the first bits of information for testing H5 about the conditioning effect of problem-solving approach preferences on the effect of performance information on ownership perceptions. Thus, the two panels show that information that the unemployment rate or the budget improved during the Social Democrats’ time in government spills over on the evaluation of the party’s handling of the overarching issue of the economy: Improvements on either of the two aspects of the economy thereby seems to enhance ownership perceptions regarding the economy *in toto*.

[Figures 4 and 5]

Figure 5 breaks down the results by respondents’ preferences for tackling the economy. The results do not conform entirely to our expectations. Thus, voters who prefer to fight unemployment and voters who prefer to balance the budget are almost equally impressed by the information about the party’s performance on both

approaches. Even voters who prefer to balance the budget seem to increase their ownership rating of the Social Democrats if informed that the party has brought down unemployment just as those preferring to fight unemployment increase their rating of the party when informed that it has improved the budget. Furthermore, these effects also apply for ownership of the economy: No matter which approach respondents prefer, their rating of the Social Democrats increases when informed about improvements in either of the two areas addressed by the approaches (i.e., unemployment or the budget). This runs counter to H5.

We would suggest that the reason behind this unexpected finding has to do with the nature of the issues involved. Both balancing the budget and fighting unemployment are true valence issues in the sense that they are desirable ends to most voters and there is no necessary trade-off between them. Even if you prefer one, you do not have to dislike the other – in fact you might very well like both. Therefore, when we provide respondents with information that the public finances improved or that unemployment was lowered while the Social Democrats were in government, irrespective of which of these two they like better, voters may increase their evaluation of the party's capacity to handle both the given approach (i.e., balancing the budget or fighting unemployment) and the overall issue of the Danish economy. This is the pattern we see in Figures 4 and 5. The theoretical implication of this interpretation is that we should not see the results as counting against H5. Rather, they indicate a boundary condition for the hypothesis in the sense that it only works when the problem-solving approaches involved are not valence issues in their own right.

If this is the case, then we should, however, expect to observe the conditioning effect in our second test of H5 on the overall issue of fighting

unemployment¹¹ since here we posit two problem-solving approaches that are not equally desirable to all. In Figure 6 we can, first, observe how the main effects of Social Democratic performance on the two unemployment reducing approaches (spending on continued education or making it less attractive to be on benefits) on ownership ratings for either approach (panels A and C) are somewhat limited and even insignificant in one case. This pattern is also found in ownership ratings on the overall issue of unemployment asked in connection with each of the two performance manipulations (panels B and D).

[Figures 6 and 7]

But when conditioning, in Figure 7, on respondents' preferred unemployment fighting approach we find exactly the expected effects. For both approaches we see that those who prefer the approach are, first, more likely to increase their ownership rating of the Social Democrats on the approach itself. Second, they are also more likely to increase the ownership rating on the overall issue. In fact, for the approach consisting in making it less attractive to be on benefits, we see a contrast effect so that those who prefer the continuing education approach decrease their ownership rating of the Social Democrats on both the approach itself and the overarching issue of unemployment when informed that the party supported the measure to make it less attractive to be on benefits. This is entirely as hypothesized. All in all, thus, we see the results as supporting H5.

Summing up, a party can according to the analysis improve on voters' ratings of its handling of an issue by providing information that it represents an

¹¹ Readers should bear in mind that respondents only participated in one of the two experiments used for testing H5, i.e., either the one about the Danish economy or the one about unemployment.

important constituency on the issue or that it is performing well on the issue. It is noteworthy that improvements in a party's ratings from providing information of its link to a relevant constituency can be made among voters from both of the two main political blocks. Moreover when the approaches involved are not themselves of valence character, the effect of information on performance is particularly strong among the voters that prefer the problem-solving approach, the party has performed on. In contrast, we do not find evidence that a party can improve its issue ownership perception among the voters by communicating its position on or priority of the issue.

4 Discussion

Parties enthusiastically communicate to voters about various issues and extant research (e.g., Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Walgrave and De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009) has shown that such communication can influence voters' issue ownership perceptions. Yet, our knowledge about what it is in parties' communication that most effectively influences voters' perceptions is limited. In this experimental study, we bring new insights on what information parties can use to influence voters' perceptions. We find that when voters are provided with information about a party's representation of a constituency relevant for an issue, its issue ownership improves systematically. We find the same effect when voters receive information about the party's performance on an issue. In contrast, ratings do not seem to improve when voters receive information about a party's priority of an issue or its position on an issue. Hence, within the limits discussed above, a party is able to use its communication to enhance its issue ownership, but not all communication strategies seem to work equally well. Whereas previous research has highlighted the latter two strategies (see, e.g., Gadarian, 2010; Egan, 2013), the former two have not received much attention in existing (particularly experimental) work on parties' influence on issue ownership perceptions although they

are at the heart of Petrocik's (1996) theory of issue ownership. By documenting their potential for influencing issue ownership perceptions, thus, we extend existing knowledge.

It is perhaps surprising that the previously highlighted strategies do not seem to work in our study. One explanation could be that they simply do not work. Given the theoretical expectations that they should as well as the more positive results of previous studies, however, there might also be other explanations for our negative results. For the emphasis experiments, first, it might be the case that our manipulation is simply too vague. Thus, as pointed out by Norpoth and Buchanan (1992) voters might require more than one exposure to a party's emphasis of a given issue to accept it as relevant for their evaluation of the party's issue ownership. In fact, precisely for the emphasis strategy, the bar for influencing voters' perceptions might be higher since the strategy does not entail any information about what the party might want to do on the issue – it merely involves attention. To the extent that such mechanisms are at work, it implies that our experiment is unable to capture the effect. A stronger manipulation either in one survey or over the course of some time might be employed in future work.

But of course the failure of the two hypotheses may also be due to pre-treatment effects as discussed previously. Because we only included well-known combinations of parties and issues in our design, we ran the risk that also respondents in the control conditions were taking the information provided in the stimulus conditions into account simply because it is part of their trust of knowledge about the parties – i.e., because they have been pre-treated with it. As noted, this problem is difficult to overcome when simultaneously keeping the stimulus as realistic as possible, but a less common, yet still realistic, combination of parties and issues might enable the detection of the expected effect. Future work should investigate this question.

Another question that might be explored in future work is the duration of the effects we find. From our design, thus, it is impossible to determine how long the effects last, but as just discussed for the case of the emphasis strategy (cf. Norpoth and Buchanan, 1992) it might be necessary for parties to repeat the relevant information several times in order to obtain a lasting effect. However, in the context of a tight election campaign, even short-lived effects may have positive effects for a party if it succeeds in improving ownership over an issue that is salient in the campaign. If the effects can last until Election Day, thus, that might be all it would take for the party to benefit electorally. In such a campaign setting, the effectiveness of strategies may as discussed above be challenged by other parties trying to either discredit such an issue ownership campaign and/or to jump on the bandwagon and claim ownership for themselves. Even though the study by Dahlberg and Martinsson (2015) that did involve a competitive set-up did not suggest adverse effects of such party competition, further studies will have to explore both this aspect and the question about effect duration more thoroughly.

Finally, it is worth discussing the generalizability of the results. What we have shown above, thus, is that at least two of the four strategies work for some parties in one country. Should we expect similar effects for other parties and countries? Our answer is yes. First, our results corroborate those of parallel studies in countries such as Belgium (Walgrave et al., 2009) and Sweden (Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015). Second, we see no reason why the effects should not apply also to other parties that are able to convincingly (i.e., building on prior behaviour) engage in the kinds of communicative strategies in focus here. Where generalizability might be more questionable is with regard to the associative dimension of issue ownership. To the extent that Walgrave and co-authors (2012) are right in seeing this as a dimension of issue-ownership separate from the competence dimension in focus here (as well as in most work on the topic), it

is less obvious that all of the strategies investigated here would work in the same way for associative issue ownership. This will also be an avenue for future work.

In the meantime, our results underline how information about two hitherto underexplored, but key components in Petrocik's (1996) issue ownership theory – a party's relationship with issue-constituencies and its performance on an issue – can be used strategically in communication by parties attempting to improve on their issue ownership in the eyes of the electorate. The analyses thereby contribute to the growing strand of literature investigating this dynamic aspect of what was until recently perceived a stable pillar of party competition and electoral behaviour.

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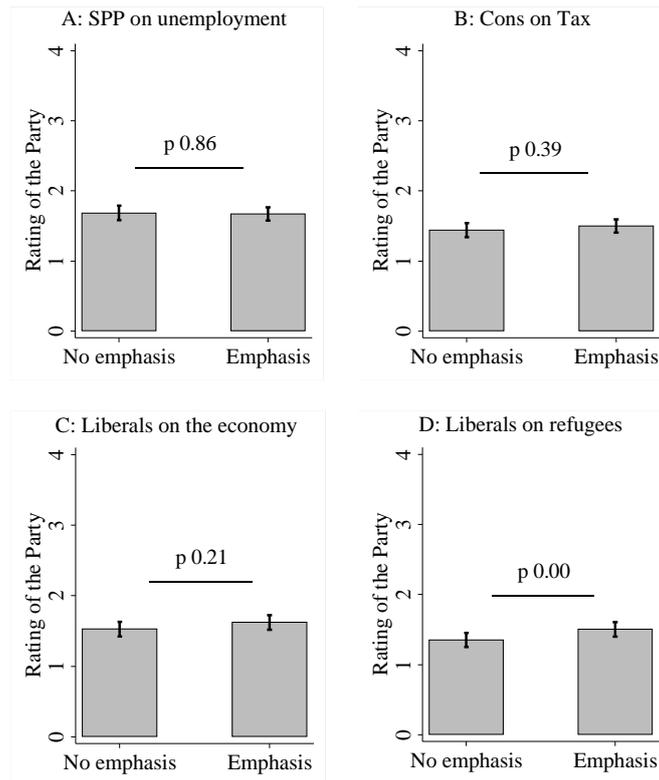
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Figure 1. The effect of a party's issue emphasis on its ownership rating on this issue.



Note: "SPP" refers to the Socialist People's Party. "Cons" refers to the Conservatives.

Figure 2. The effect of a party's issue position on its ownership rating on this issue.

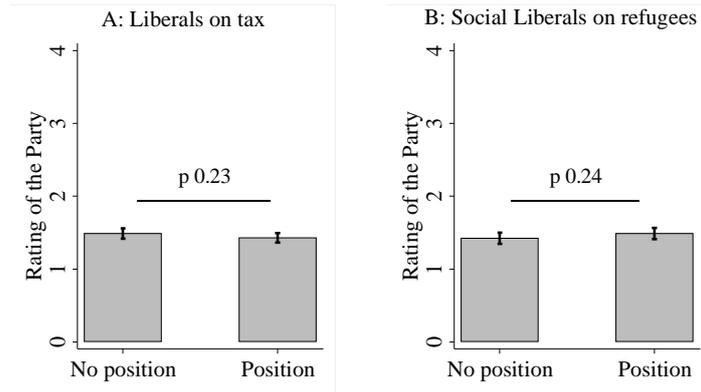
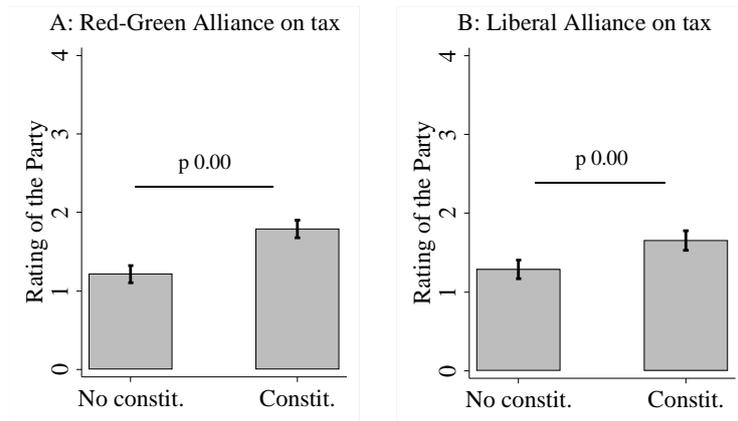
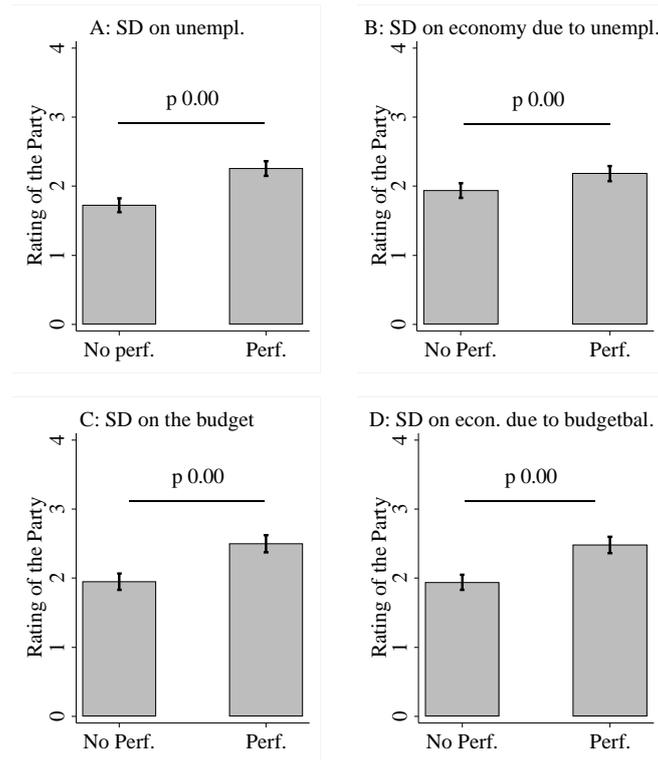


Figure 3. The effect of a party's issue constituency link on its ownership rating on this issue.



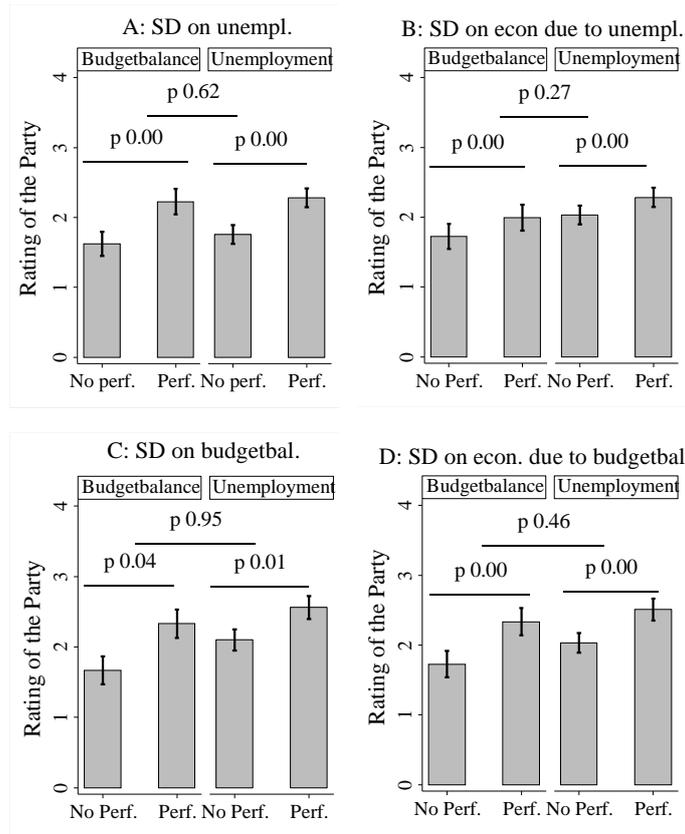
Note: "Constit." refers to constituency.

Figure 4. The effect of a party's issue performance on its ownership rating on this issue.



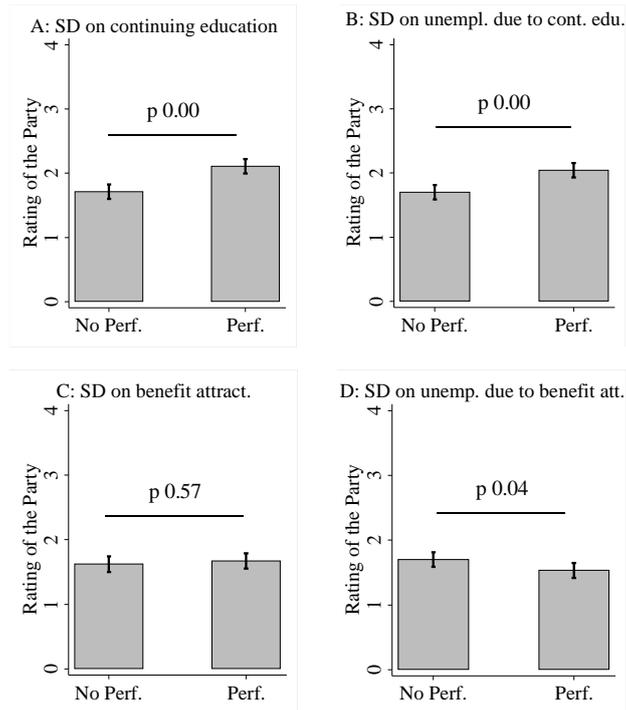
Note: "SD" refers to the Social Democrats. "Perf." refers to performance.

Figure 5. The effect of a party's issue performance on its ownership rating on this issue conditional on respondents' preferred strategy on the issue.



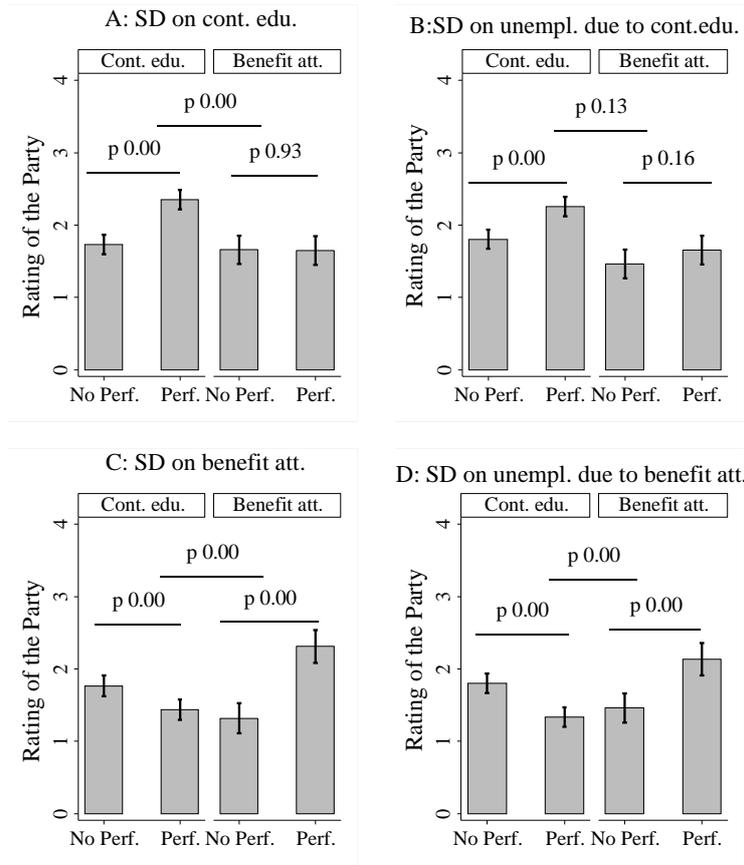
Note: In the triangle of p-values above the bars, the upper p-value denotes the statistical significance of the interaction term between the preferred performance strategy and the experimental condition (i.e. the difference-in-differences). SD is an abbreviation of the Social Democrats and "Perf." refers to performance.

Figure 6. The effect of a party's issue performance on its ownership rating on this issue.



Note: "SD" refers to the Social Democrats. "Perf." refers to performance.

Figure 7. The effect of a party’s issue performance on its ownership rating on this issue conditional on respondents’ preferred strategy on the issue.



Note: In the triangle of p-values above the bars, the upper p-value denotes the statistical significance of the interaction term between the preferred performance strategy and the experimental condition (i.e. the difference-in-differences). “SD” refers to the Social Democrats, “Perf.” refers to performance, “Cont. edu.” refers to continued education, and “att.” refers to attractiveness.

Online Appendix for

NN and NN

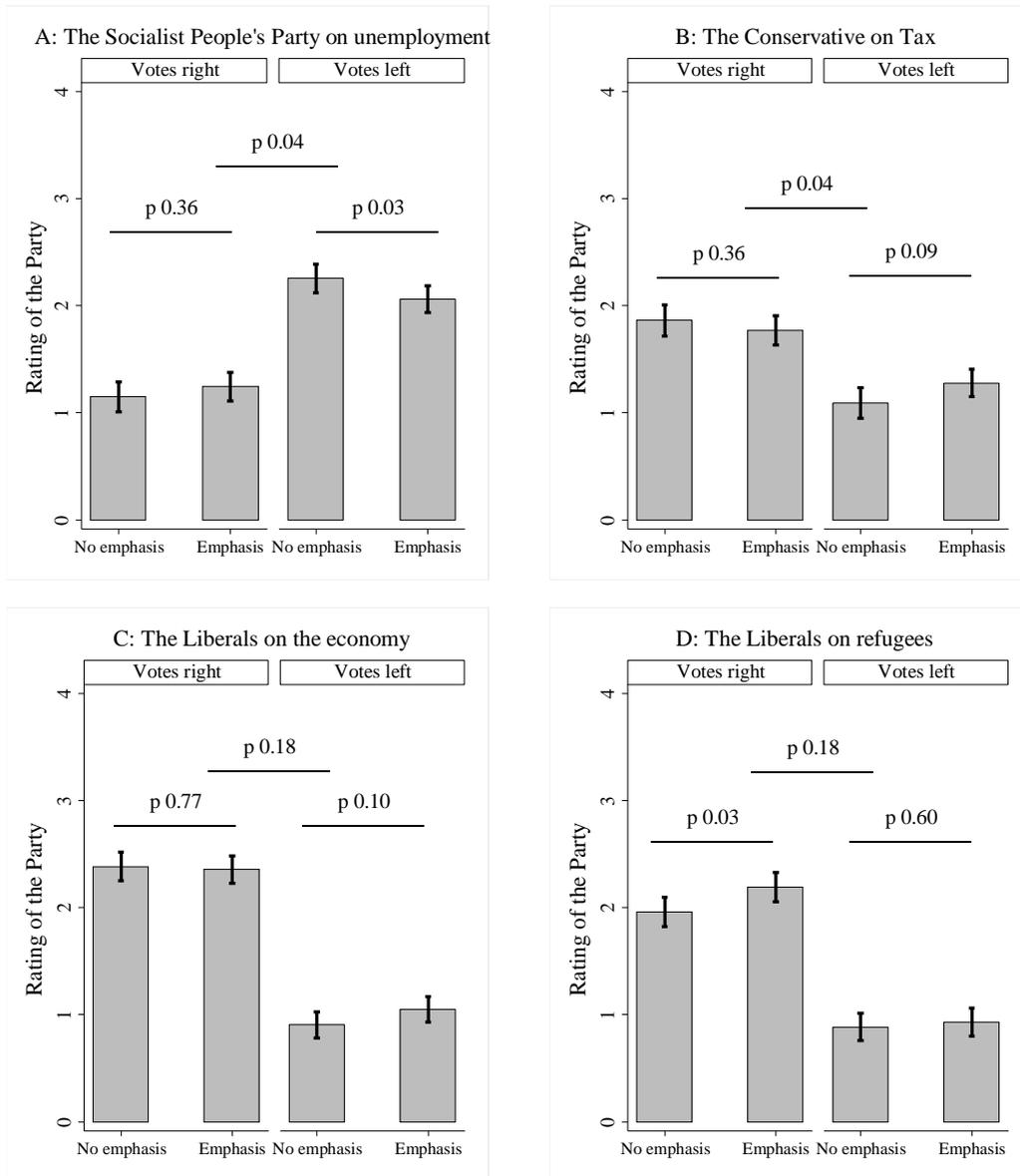
What can a party say?

How parties' communication can influence voters' issue ownership perceptions

Submitted for publication in *Electoral Studies*

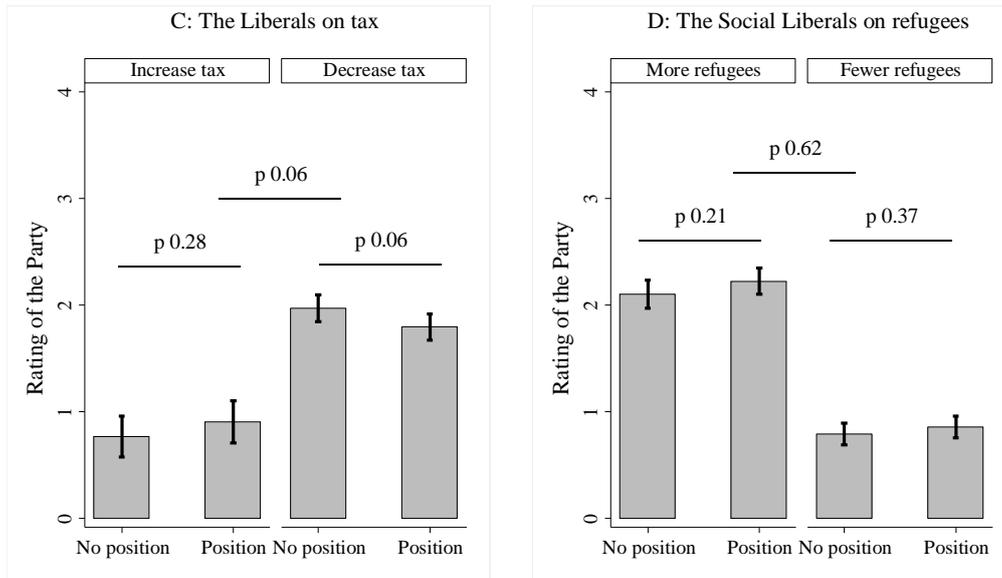
This online appendix contains supplementary information in the form of additional analyses and an overview of the wording and randomization of all experiments.

Figure A1. The effect of a party's issue emphasis on its ownership rating on this issue conditional on respondents' vote choice.



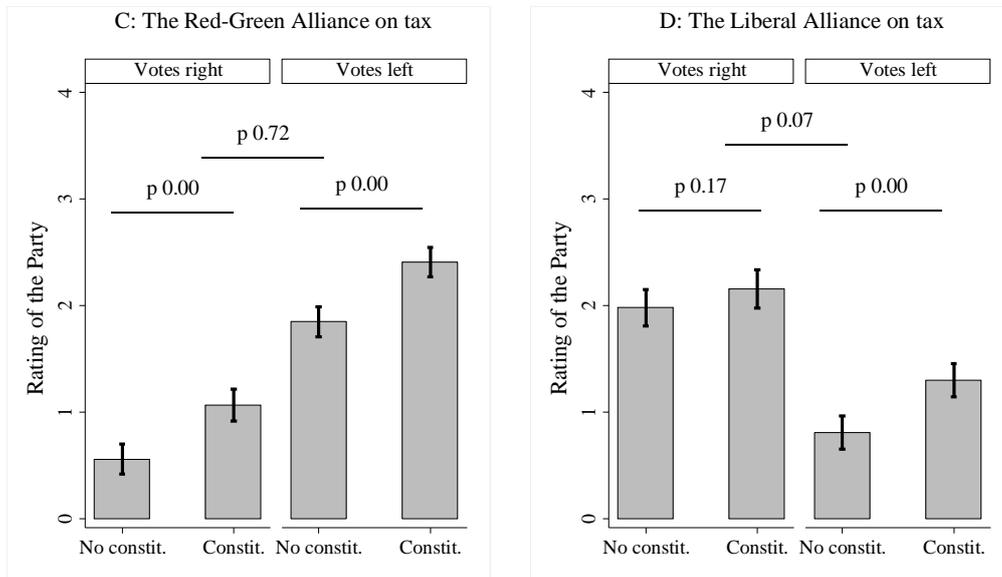
Note: In the triangle of p-values above the bars, the upper p-value denotes the statistical significance of the interaction term between vote choice and experimental condition (i.e. the difference-in-differences).

Figure A2. The effect of a party's issue position on its ownership rating on this issue conditional on respondents' issue position.



Note: In the triangle of p-values above the bars, the upper p-value denotes the statistical significance of the interaction term between the respondents' position on the issue and the experimental condition (i.e. the difference-in-differences).

Figure A3. The effect of a party's issue constituency link on its ownership rating on this issue conditional on respondents' vote choice.



Note: In the triangle of p-values above the bars, the upper p-value denotes the statistical significance of the interaction term between vote choice and experimental condition (i.e. the difference-in-differences). “Constit.” refers to constituency.

The Survey Experiments

Set 1: Information about party issue emphasis

Respondents were randomly allocated to either E1 and E3 or E2 and E4.

Experiment 1

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties prioritize political questions differently. In the political debate, the Socialist People's Party often emphasize unemployment. The party leader, Pia Olsen Dyhr, has for instance recently said that jobs 'is one of the concerns that we pay the most attention to'. Considering that the Socialist People's Party often puts emphasis on unemployment, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling this issue? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Socialist People's Party is at handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Experiment 2

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties prioritize political questions differently. In the political debate, the Conservatives often emphasize taxation. The party leader, Søren Pape Poulsen, has for instance recently said that the party likes to talk 'loud and long about taxes, and as much as possible'. Considering that the Conservatives often put emphasis on taxation, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling this issue? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Conservatives is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Experiment 3

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties prioritize political questions differently. In the political debate, the Liberals often emphasize the Danish economy. Its party leader, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, has for instance recently said that 'it has never been more important to have a solid economy'. Considering that the Liberals often put emphasis on the Danish economy, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling this issue? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Liberals are at handling the Danish economy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Experiment 4

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties prioritize political questions differently. In the political debate, the Liberals often emphasize the refugee policy. The party has for instance recently said that one of its 'key priorities' is to have a reasonable refugee policy. Considering that the Liberals often put emphasis on the refugee policy, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling this issue? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Liberals are at handling the refugee policy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Set 2: Information about party constituency representation

Respondents were randomly allocated to either E5 or E6.

Experiment 5

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties are often seen as representing different groups in society. The Red-Green Alliance is for instance by some seen as representatives of the lowest income groups when taxation is being debated. Considering that the Red-Green Alliance is seen by some to represent the lowest income groups when taxation is being debated, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Red-Green Alliance is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Experiment 6

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political parties are often seen as representing different groups in society. The Liberal Alliance is for instance by some seen as representatives of the well-off when taxation is being debated. Considering that the Liberal Alliance is seen by some to represent the well-off when taxation is being debated, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Liberal Alliance is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Set 3: Information about party positions

Experiment 7

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political Parties have different opinions on taxation. In recent years, the Liberals have for instance advocated for lowering the tax rate. Considering that the Liberals in recent years have advocated for lowering the tax rate, how good or bad do you think the

party is at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Liberals are at handling taxation? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Experiment 8

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1 or V2

V1. Political Parties have different opinions on the refugee policy. In recent years, the Social Liberals have for instance advocated for receiving more refugees. Considering that the Social Liberals in recent years have advocated for receiving more refugees, how good or bad do you think the party is at handling the refugee policy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. How good or bad do you think the Social Liberals are at handling the refugee policy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Set 4: Information about party performance on the economy

Respondents were randomly allocated to either Set 4 or 5.

Experiment 9

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1, V2 or V3. V1 and V2 each consisted of an intro text and two questions. V3 consisted of three questions.

V1. Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle an issue. While the Social Democrats were in government, the unemployment rate decreased from 225,000 persons to 182,000 persons according to figures from Statistics Denmark.

Q1. Considering that the unemployment rate decreased while the Social Democrats were in government, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at

handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. The unemployment rate is very important for the Danish economy. Considering that the unemployment rate decreased while the Social Democrats were in government, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling the Danish economy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle an issue. While the Social Democrats were in government, the public finances improved from a deficit of 14.5 billion DKK in the fourth quarter of 2011 to a surplus of 12.4 billion DKK in the fourth quarter of 2014 according to figures from Statistics Denmark.

Q1. Considering that the public finances improved while the Social Democrats were in government, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at balancing the public budget? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. It is very important for the Danish economy whether there is a surplus or deficit in the public finances. Considering that the public finances improved while the Social Democrats were in government, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling the Danish economy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V3. The order of Q1, Q2 and Q3 was randomized.

Q1. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at balancing the public budget? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q3. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling the Danish economy? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Set 5: Information about party performance on unemployment

Experiment 10

Respondents were randomly allocated to either V1, V2 or V3. V1 and V2 each consisted of an intro text and two questions. V3 consisted of three questions.

V1. Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle an issue. The Social Democratic government for instance increased by 250 million DKK the annual spending on continued education for the unemployed so that they can find a new job.

Q1. Considering that the Social Democratic government increased by 250 million DKK the annual spending on continued education for the unemployed, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at ensuring that the unemployed get continued education so that they can find a new job? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. Considering that the Social Democratic government increased by 250 million DKK the annual spending on continued education for the unemployed so that they can find a new job, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V2. Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle an issue. The Social Democratic government for instance reduced the entitlement period for unemployment benefits from four to two years to make it less attractive to receive unemployment benefits so that the unemployed will be more inclined to seek jobs.

Q1. Considering that the Social Democratic government decreased the entitlement period for unemployment benefits from four to two years, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at ensuring that it is less attractive to receive unemployment benefits so that the unemployed will be more inclined to seek jobs? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. Considering that the Social Democratic government decreased the entitlement period of unemployment benefit from four to two years so that the unemployed will be more inclined to seek jobs, how good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

V3. The order of Q1, Q2 and Q3 was randomized.

Q1. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at ensuring that the unemployed get continued education so that they can find a new job? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q2. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at ensuring that it is less attractive to receive unemployment benefits so that the unemployed will be more inclined to seek jobs? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Q3. How good or bad do you think the Social Democrats are at handling unemployment? (Very good, good, neither good or bad, bad, very bad, don't know).

Tabel A1. Overview of the randomization in the survey experiments. Total N = 2,014.

Set 1: Randomization for the test of information about a party's issue emphasis

Experiment 1 and 3 (N = 1,009)		Experiment 2 and 4 (N = 1,005)	
Experiment 1: Socialist People's Party on unemployment		Experiment 2: Conservatives on taxation	
Treatment (N = 515)	Control (N = 494)	Treatment (N = 518)	Control (N = 487)
Experiment 3: Liberals on the economy		Experiment 4: Liberals on refugees	
Treatment (N = 508)	Control (N = 501)	Treatment (N = 492)	Control (N = 513)

Set 2: Randomization for the test of information about a party's link to an issue constituency

Experiment 5: Red-Green Alliance on taxation (N = 1,026)		Experiment 6: Liberal Alliance on taxation (N = 988)	
Treatment (N = 490)	Control (N = 536)	Treatment (N = 471)	Control (N = 517)

Set 3: Randomization for the test of information about a party's position on an issue

Experiment 7: Liberals on taxation	
Treatment (N = 1,039)	Control (N = 975)
Experiment 8: Social Liberals on refugees	
Treatment (N = 1,001)	Control (N = 1,013)

Set 4 + Set 5: Randomization for the test of information about a party's performance on an issue

Set 4: Experiment 9			Set 5: Experiment 10		
Treatment 1: Social Democrats on unemployment and the economy due to unemployment (N = 337)	Treatment 2: Social Democrats on the budget balance and the economy due to the budget balance (N = 309)	Control: Social Democrats on unemployment, the budget balance and the economy (N = 359, order of items randomized)	Treatment 1: Social Democrats on continued education and unemployment due to continued education (N = 327)	Treatment 2: Social Democrats on benefit attractiveness and unemployment due to benefit attractiveness (N = 332)	Control: Social Democrats on continued education, benefit attractiveness and unemployment (N = 350, order of items randomized)