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Priming, Issue Ownership, and Party Support:

The Electoral Gains of an Issue-Friendly Media Agenda

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Abstract

Issue ownership theory posits a positive relationship between electoral support and public attention to issues that a party "owns." We investigate this key prediction of the issue ownership theory in a dynamic analysis of 20 years of party support and media coverage across multiple parties and issues. The results provide support for the basic electoral implication of issue ownership theory, showing that increased media attention to owned issues increases support for the issue owners. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the effect of the ownership mechanism materializes differently for opposition and government parties. Opposition parties benefit from media attention to owned issues without losing ground when news concentrates on issues owned by government parties, while government parties, always struggling with the electoral cost of ruling, lose votes when news about opposition-owned issues increases without gaining support when the media agenda is "issue-friendly."

In his critique of the spatial Downsian perspective on party competition, Robertson (1976) argued that party competition is not simply about offering policy positions on a left–right dimension; it is also a contest about which issues should dominate the public agenda. The claim was based on the assumption that some issues are more electorally favorable to one party than to others. Budge and Farlie (1983) were the first to use this idea in a systematic study of elections, and Petrocik (1996)—building on Budge and Farlie—later introduced the theory of issue ownership. The theory posits a positive relationship between changes in electoral support and public attention to issues that a party "owns," that is, issues that a party is perceived to be best at handling.

This central implication of issue ownership theory has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. One strand of research has simply used ownership theory to explain the selective issue emphases of political parties without investigating the underlying assumption concerning the effect of attention to owned issues on party support (e.g., Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Sides 2006; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Another strand of research operates closer to this assumption, addressing how voting behavior is affected by the issues voters find important (e.g., Aardal and van Wijnen 2005; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; van der Brug 2004). However, issue ownership theory is not only about voters casting ballots based on *their* issue agenda; the dynamic underpinning of the theory implies that party support is affected by the constantly changing information environment in which voters live.

A few empirical studies of selected issues provide some support for this mechanism by revealing how the news coverage of issues owned by a given party can increase voter support for that party (Ansolabere and Iyengar 1994; Beyer et al. 2014; Boomgarden and Vliegenhart 2007; Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Focusing on shorter periods of time or only one or two issues and parties, these studies still leave central questions open about the scope and conditionality of the issue-ownership mechanism. This article begins by investigating whether the dynamic ownership effect can be found over a long time span, across a broad range of issues, and for a full electorate and party system. Second, we argue theoretically and demonstrate empirically how the ownership effect on party support play out differently for incumbent and opposition parties, respectively. Given the cost of ruling from being in government, incumbents are punished

electorally from increased public attention to opponent-owned issues, whereas the opposition does not experience similar popularity losses when attention to government-owned issues increases. On the other hand, opposition parties increase their support as public attention to owned issues increases, whereas the support for government parties remains unchanged following spikes in public attention for 'their' issues. Hence, although parties in general profit from public attention to their issues, incumbency will determine the exact electoral implications of the issue ownership mechanism. For parties in office, the distribution of attention to owned and opponent-owned issues at best serves to curb the electoral losses that typically accompany policy responsibility. While for parties out of office, a favorable distribution of attention to owned vs opponent-owned issues boosts the electoral gains that typically accompany opposition status.

Empirically, our arguments are examined based on a large dataset in which we combine data on vote intention with an issue content coding of more than 100,000 Danish radio news items measured daily from 1984–2003. The analysis thus focuses on how party support is affected by changes in attention for owned and opponent-owned issues in the media, because media attention is crucial to the issue agenda in the public debate (McCombs 2004). A media-centered approach has also been used in most of the previous issue-ownership studies similar to ours (Beyer et al. 2014; Boomgarden and Vliegenhart 2007; Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Consistent with issue ownership theory, the argument is that the media agenda primes voters, thereby influencing the electoral support for political parties. When media attention for issues that a party owns increases, these issues become more important to voter's decisions about which party to support. Consequently, this data provides a unique opportunity to study the ever-changing information environment relevant to a nation of voters and how it affects the strength of different parties in a political system over a long time frame.

Issue Competition, Issue Ownership, and Media Priming

Research on issue competition and especially issue ownership has been a growth industry in political science in recent years. This literature has provided an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of issue competition (e.g., Abou-Chadi 2014; van der Wardt 2015), what issue ownership means, and how it develops over time (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Egan 2013; Slothuus and Stubager 2012;

Walgrave et al. 2012). However, surprisingly few studies have tested the assumption that justifies the strong interest in issue ownership in the first place: It is a theory about what determines elections, based on the assumption that support for political parties fluctuates according to the amount of public attention "their" issues receive.

In Petrocik's (1996: 825-826) seminal study, issue-ownership is conceptualized as a theory of campaign effects that supplement the impact of stable predispositions and structural variables on vote choice. Starting from these premises and the notion that issue reputations influence electoral outcomes, a number of studies have investigated how voting behavior is affected by the issues that voters find important (e.g., Aardal and van Wijnen 2005; Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; van der Brug 2004). Agendas are never set and no two campaigns are ever alike. According to the ownership theory, voters therefore prioritize different issues when choosing candidates or parties at different points in time. Issue ownership theory thus encompasses priming; the theory is about how party support is influenced by which issues that receive attention in the information environment surrounding the voters. When for instance crime is high on the agenda, the party that owns this issue profits because voters are primed to think favorably of that party. Putting the theory to test should therefore also entail examining the priming dynamic, studying how voters respond to changes in the issue agendas relevant to political debates. Nevertheless, the bulk of electoral research that has dealt with issue voting examines how the issue agenda of voters affects their party choice at a given point in time (cf. Aardal and van Wijnen 2005; van der Brug 2004), leaving the question regarding responsiveness to changes in the information environment unexplored.

A few studies deviate from this characterization. From experiments embedded in two senate races in the US, we know that crime news boosted Republican support, whereas news about unemployment favored the Democrats (Ansolabere and Iyengar 1994). Furthermore, studies from the Netherlands (Boomgarden and Vliegenhart 2007) and Belgium (Walgrave and De Swert 2004), respectively, indicate that media coverage of immigration and crime can to some degree explain increased voter support for anti-immigration and extreme rightist parties. Similar conclusions can be drawn from a recent survey experiment of Norwegian voters (Beyer et al. 2014). These excellent forays into the relationship between

media priming, issue ownership, and party support deserve to be followed up in investigations covering a wider range of issues and parties. Furthermore, as two of the four studies are experimental, a key element of uncertainty is of course the extent to which the treatments given to respondents capture the comprehensive information environment that the voters experience in the media every day.

Iyengar and Kinder's concept of media priming is highly relevant for our approach to the electoral effect of issue ownership: "By calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, (television) news influence the standards by which governments, presidents, politics, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar and Kinder 1987: 63). Although the literature on priming following from this definition is quite extensive, few, if any, priming studies have addressed media priming from the perspective of issue ownership and party support. The literature has focused mainly on individual-level moderators and individual-level causal mechanisms (e.g., Hart and Middleton 2014; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Lenz 2009). The study by Sheafer and Weismann (2005) of four Israeli elections is an exception in so far as it examines the effects of priming on the support for political parties, but without linking it to issue ownership.

Issue ownership patterns may fluctuate (e.g. Brasher 2009), but there is indeed a stable component to it. This is often conceptualized via references to the historical constituencies of political parties (Petrocik 1996: 827); parties may have long-term ownership to an issue because they have mobilized and represented groups with a special interest in this issue. As a result, many issues important to party competition show a consistency with regard to ownership. For instance, the left-wing usually enjoys more positive voter evaluations on welfare issues and unemployment, while the right-wing consistently scores high on issues relating to business and taxation (Seeberg forthcoming). In this paper, which investigates ownership effects on vote intention over a long period, we therefore concentrate on the stable component of the link between issues and parties. Although the literature on priming has neglected the link between issue ownership and party support, it nevertheless suggests that news attention affects how the electorate evaluates politicians and parties. Combined with the results of the few studies that actually do connect media priming and issue ownership, we find it reasonable to assume that the news media affect the support for political parties by highlighting some issues at the cost of others. Our first and most general expectation therefore reads:

Hypothesis 1: Higher media attention to owned issues increases party support, while higher media attention to opponent-owned issues reduces party support.

Hypothesis 1 is consistent with the classical theory of issue ownership, but there are strong reasons to expect that the relationship between selective news coverage and voter support is conditional upon the government status of political parties.[1] The literature on the "cost of ruling" has repeatedly shown how governing parties generally suffer electoral defeats (Rose and Mackie 1983; Paldam and Skott 1995; Stevenson 2002). As Strøm (1990, 573) argues, voters prefer reliable and responsible parties and "Governing parties have their reliability (consistency between promise and performance) more severely tested than the opposition." Of course, simple logic dictates that an electoral disadvantage for officeholders translates to a corresponding advantage for the opposition.

However, from the perspective of this study, the implication is that there should be a differential impact of news priming of owned issues on electoral support. The basic mechanism is the same, but given that incumbents normally find themselves in a domain of vote losses it is not realistic to expect an increase in government support from issue-ownership and media priming. What issue-ownership and media priming can do for a government is to curb the negative effects of cost of ruling and lead to electoral stability. To the opposition an issue-friendly media agenda represents an opportunity to boost the electoral gains normally experienced by challengers. Note that we do not claim that the ownership mechanism in itself necessarily differs in these two contexts. What we claim is that this mechanism produces different observable outcomes for incumbents and challengers, and ignoring this fundamental difference between government and opposition may conceal important issue ownership effects. Both government and opposition parties profit from media attention to owned issues, but policy responsibility strongly affects the way in which issue ownership pays off.

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[1] Actor appearance or party cues in the news coverage might strengthen the issue priming effect (see Bos et al. 2016). However, the strongest test of the general issue priming argument is to simply focus on media attention to the issue, as this – according to the theory – should activate positive party reputations in the electorate.

This differential impact of media priming of owned and opponent-owned issues is summarized in the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Higher media attention to owned issues increases opposition support, while higher media attention to opponent-owned issues has little or no effect on opposition support.

Hypothesis 3: Higher media attention to opponent-owned issues reduces government support, while higher media attention to owned issues has little or no effect government support.

Data and Research Design

When examining the link between media priming, issue ownership, and party support, we make use of a comprehensive data set combining monthly opinion polls with radio news items from 1984-2003 in Denmark. The media agenda is measured drawing on data from Danish radio news in the period 1984-2003. The radio news was produced by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), which in this period enjoyed a *de facto* monopoly on broadcasting radio news and had an audience of approximately 1 million listeners in a country with 5 million citizens. From the perspective of other news sources and those *not* listening to radio news, studies of the Danish media system have found these broadcasts to be an important link between the agenda of morning papers and evening TV news (Lund 2002). The DR broadcasts are therefore arguably a sound and efficient means by which to measure the news agenda that the Danish electorate experienced during our period of investigation.[2]

News broadcasts were coded twice daily (at noon and 6.30 pm), resulting in a dataset of approximately 114,000 news features. Each feature was coded with regard to issue content based on an issue coding

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[2] Note also that the Danish radio news never had a reputation for having a particular political color, probably because of the limited tradition for "self-made" stories.

scheme with 58 categories[3] For the analysis, only 27 of these issue categories were used relating to policy issues like the environment, economy, social welfare, defense, transportation, and health. [4]

Denmark is a typical example of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) democratic corporatist model (Allern and Blach-Ørsten 2011). Yet the theoretical argument of this article is very general, suggesting that the scope of the findings should not be restricted to the Northern European context. Different media systems generally fulfill the key assumption of our argument: Politics is mediatized in the sense that voters get their information about parties, positions, and policies from the media as noted above (Strömbäck 2008). The issue content of the media agenda might differ across systems due to, for instance, variations in political parallelism, state intervention, and the emphasis on commercial news values, as highlighted by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Nevertheless, from the perspective of our case selection, the most important aspect is that the general mechanism should be the same, although the issue content of the media agenda may vary across media systems.

With respect to the measure of issue ownership, we approach this question from a party-bloc perspective. Similar to most European PR systems, Denmark is a multiparty system. But Danish party competition is nevertheless characterized by two blocs of parties—one on the left, the other on the right—providing clear government alternatives (Green-Pedersen and Thomsen 2005). This is of course a

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[3] The coding scheme is a simplified version of the Danish policy agenda-setting coding scheme with more than 230 policy categories, which again is a modified version of the American policy agenda-setting coding scheme originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones (see www.policyagendas.org). The issue coding was done by 11 student coders who completed one week of intensive training. During coding, an intercoder reliability test was performed by a master coder (project leader), who recoded randomly selected news features. For each of the 11 coders, percentage agreement scores were calculated and 90% agreement was set as the minimum target. Recoding continued until it was established with 95% certainty that the percentage agreement was minimum 90%. Across the coders, the required recoding was between 100 and 269 news features. See (blinded for review) for further details about the coding.

[4] The excluded categories measured radio news attention to political news from abroad with no direct relation to Danish politics, such as a military coup on a distant continent or a US presidential election. This also reduced the number of news features on which the analysis is based from above 190,000 to 114,000.

simplification of the dynamics of the Danish multiparty system, but also a reminder that our study bears relevance for similar multiparty systems as well as a two-party context.

The left-wing or Social Democrat-led bloc consists of the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party, and more extreme left-wing parties (e.g., the Red-Green Alliance). The Social Liberals have also typically supported the leftist bloc, although the party has supported the right bloc in certain periods. This was the case from 1982 to 1993. The right-wing, bourgeois bloc consists of the Liberals (*Venstre*) and Conservatives together with the radical right-wing parties (Progress Party, Danish People's Party). The two small, centrist parties, Centre Democrats and Christian People's Party, have typically also supported the right bloc. Note that the Danish tradition for minority governments implies that not all parties from a bloc actually take part in the government — some merely serve as so-called "support parties;" however, all parties clearly belong to a bloc when it comes to the question of government formation. Thus, we keep "support parties" in the bloc, also when that bloc enters office.[5]

There are different dimensions of the issue ownership concept, the most relevant for this study being the competence dimension (Walgrave et al. 2012). This is the aspect of ownership in focus when discussing how voters evaluate political parties. For the main analysis reported in the article, we use the eight issues for which we have survey measures of competence ownership at some point in our period of investigation.[6] The source is Danish election surveys that have measured issue ownership over several elections.[7] The survey questions specifically tap voters' competence images of the two blocs (Social

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[5] Otherwise, we would have to drop the bloc-approach (which is directly related to the way issue ownership is measured; see next section) and restrict the analyses to mainstream parties with consistent presence in office. To assess the consequences of our bloc-approach, we perform additional analyses on the party-level (see page 16-17, and table D1 and figure D2 in the supplemental material) that address the empirical consequences of counting only parties in office as the government.

[6] This means that half (51% or approximately 58,000 of 114,000) of the news features in the dataset are ascribed to either of the blocs, while the rest are categorized as unowned.

[7] Made available from www.surveybanken.aau.dk by The Danish Election Project.

Democrat- or bourgeois-led coalitions, respectively) and not the individual parties.[8] As Table 1 illustrates, the resulting issue ownership variable thus indicates bourgeois ownership of the economy, trade and industry, law and order/crime, and immigration, and Social Democratic ownership of unemployment, environment, social welfare, and health. This stable pattern is very similar to the one found in other countries (Seeberg forthcoming).

[Table 1 around here]

Note that this approach treats issue ownership as belonging to a specific bloc over the entire period of investigation. This is mainly due to stable patterns of bloc-level issue ownership over time (Stubager et al. 2013), and the fact that Danish election surveys do not contain long, consistent time series for issue ownership for any of the issues (vary between 3 and 7 measurement points). As elaborated below, this static approach could make for a conservative test, as we do not capture the fluctuations in the ownership structure that, in theory, should affect who benefits from changes in media priming. However, in the empirical analysis reported below we do investigate this aspect in more detail.

Figure 1 displays the development of the bloc ownership of the media agenda during our period of investigation. Comparing the two blocs, we find a dominance of bourgeois ownership (27%) relative to Social Democrat ownership (24%). There is considerable variation from month to month, however, and no clear trend in terms of an increasing bias toward either of the two blocs over time.

[Figure 1 around here]

The data on party support for the period from 1984-2003 is based on monthly Gallup surveys.[9] For each month, the vote intentions for parties belonging to the two blocs were aggregated, thus forming the dependent variable of monthly bloc-level *vote intention*. Studying the development of vote intention for the two blocs, we find substantial monthly variation but no unambiguous trend toward increased dominance by

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[8] The question posed is: "Who do you think is best at handling this problem, a Social Democrat-led government or a bourgeois government?"

[9] Data kindly made available by Jacob Askham-Christensen.

any of the blocs. Rather, in line with the bloc-based party competition of the Danish system, we find that the shifts in public opinion correspond to the two shifts in government power during this period. In 1993, the left bloc took office for the first time in our 20-year period. Although their electoral advantage rapidly withered, they were able to remain in office until 2001.

[Figure 2 around here]

To estimate the effects of relevance to Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, the models reported below distinguish between whether the party blocs are in office or opposition (variable *bloc in office*).[10] Furthermore, we control for a change in bloc composition in 1993, when the Social Liberals joined the Social Democrat-led bloc (variable *bloc change*). From the perspective of Hypothesis 1, our key independent variables of interest are those which, together, indicate bloc ownership of the media agenda. This is estimated by interacting the *issue ownership* variable with the *news saliency* variable, where the latter simply notes the amount of news for an issue category (owned or unowned) as a percentage of all news features in a given month. Finally, we also interact *issue ownership* and *news saliency* with the *bloc in office* dummy in order to evaluate Hypotheses 2 and 3 about the differential impact of the media priming mechanism on government and opposition.

Methodological Issues

Three methodological issues deserve attention before proceeding to the empirical examination of the hypotheses: 1) choice of data structure and estimation models 2) control for third variables, and 3) the estimation and interpretation of interaction models.

First, the analysis models the vote intention of both blocs (Social Democratic and bourgeois) across 240 months (from January 1984 to December 2003) repeated over the two issue categories (owned and opponent-owned issues), meaning that we have: 240 months × 2 blocs × 2 ownership categories = 960

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[10] Note that when assigning the parties to either government or opposition status, we code both government parties as well as government support parties to the government bloc, and both opposition parties representing the likely government alternative as well as opposition parties supporting the government alternative as the opposition.

units of analysis. Issues and blocs are estimated as fixed effects (covariates), whereas we estimate random effect parameters for months, (randomizing over 240 months) to account for potential residual intraclass correlations within months. To assess the robustness of various estimation models, we have also experimented with other nested and non-nested multilevel specifications, including a model with dummy variables for each month, but the results reported below are remarkably robust to such variations in model assumptions.

Second, the media priming of issues is obviously not the only relevant determinant of party voter support. Given the aggregate and dynamic character of the study, many of the individual-level variables used in some voter studies become less relevant. However, one variable that may have a systematic impact on changes in macro-level party support is the economic conditions of the country (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; cf. van der Brug et al. 2007). To control for this aspect, we include a measure of economic development in Denmark. This variable, *economy*, is based on the OECD Main Economic Indicators database. More specifically, it shows the so-called Composite Leading Indicator (CLI), which is built on a wide range of key, short-term economic indicators.[11] Furthermore, it should be noted that since we are interested in the dynamic effects of the media agenda, we use first differences (month to month) in the analyses reported below. Given this dynamic specification in first differences, the analysis focuses on the systematic variation between the changes in media attention and voter support while removing all level variation (i.e., long-run effects). Thus, this dynamic estimate most likely reduces the potential bias from the structural and more stable determinants not included in the models reported below.

Finally, examining Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 requires the estimation of two- and three-way interaction models. More particularly, Hypothesis 1 is examined based on the following two-way interaction model:

$$\Delta Voter\ support = \beta_0 + \beta_{io}\ IO + \beta_{ns}\ \Delta NS + \beta_{ions}\ IO \times \Delta NS + \beta_z Z + \varepsilon \qquad (1),$$

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[11] See http://stats.oecd.org/mei/default.asp?rev=2 for details. The CLI is a times series consisting of several indicators which show a reasonably consistent relationship with a reference series (e.g., industrial production, GDP) at turning points. It provides qualitative information on short-term economic movements, especially at the turning points, meaning that its main message is the increase or decrease rather than the amplitude of the changes.

where IO is the indicator of issue ownership, NS is the measure of news saliency, and Z is a vector of the control variables. To examine Hypotheses 2 and 3, we add a dummy variable measuring whether the bloc of parties is in office or not (BO):

$$\Delta Voter\ support = \beta_0 + \beta_{io}\ IO + \beta_{ns}\ \Delta NS + \beta_{bo}\ BO + \beta_{ions}\ IO \times \Delta NS + \beta_{iobo}\ IO \times BO$$

$$+ \beta_{nsbo}\ \Delta NS \times BO + \beta_{ionsbo}\ IO \times \Delta NS \times BO + \beta_z Z + \varepsilon \qquad (2)$$

The challenge when interpreting the estimates produced by these models is that, outside of the purely linear-additive models, coefficients are not effects. The size and sign of each variable depends critically upon the value of the conditioning variables, and the effective interpretation of the effects of main relevance to Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 therefore requires the presentation of two (H1) or three (H2 and H3) dimensions. Consequently, we follow the advice of Franzese and Kam (2009) and Brambor et al. (2006) and report our results using plots of marginal effects calculated based on the regression output shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 around here]

Findings

According to Hypothesis 1, we expected increased media attention to owned issues to increase voter support. Keeping all of the control variables at their mean value, the two panels in Figure 3 spell out this interaction effect, revealing how predicted change in vote intention differs for owned and opponent-owned issues as the monthly change in news saliency varies. In the top panel, we see that when media attention for bloc-owned issues increases from one month to the next by 18 percentage points (corresponding to the maximum sample increase), vote intention for the bloc increases by 0.54 percentage points. Conversely, when the news about bloc-owned issues falls by 19 percentage points (corresponding to the maximum sample reduction), bloc support is reduced by 0.55 percentage points. In other words, a difference in vote intention of approximately 1.1 percentage points is at stake when comparing the two scenarios. To put this in perspective, the mean difference between the two blocs in Danish politics during our sampled period was 4.4 percentage points.

[Figure 3 around here]

A different pattern becomes evident for the shifts in media attention to issues owned by the opposing bloc, as illustrated in the bottom panel of Figure 3. However, this effect is not significantly different from zero for any of the changes in news saliency that occur in the sample. Summing up, the issue ownership balance in the media affects the relative strength of the two blocs, but this would primarily appear to be a result of the media priming of owned issues.

Turning to Hypotheses 2 and 3, it was expected that the media priming effect would show up differently for government and opposition parties, respectively. As noted above, an examination of these two hypotheses requires interaction between the three relevant variables: *news saliency*, *issue ownership,* and *bloc in office*. Based on the regression results reported in Table 2, Figure 4 and 5 illustrate the results of this examination, showing the predicted changes in vote intention for the four different scenarios.[12] The results clearly support the differential impact argument. If we consider the opposition bloc first (Figure 4), we see that the media priming effect is only statistically significant for changes in media attention to owned issues. The opposition is able to profit from an issue-friendly media agenda (top left panel), and do not lose ground when opponent-owned issues increase their saliency (top right panel). Governing parties and their bloc allies, on the other hand, will not increase their support following increased media attention to "their" issues (top panel, Figure 5), but they stand to lose support when opponent-owned issues rise on the media agenda (bottom panel, Figure 5).

Notice also the strength of the statistically significant effects in the two left panels: Maximum to minimum changes in news saliency are associated with changes in bloc support of approximately +/– 1.75 percentage points. Even when we apply a more moderate approach, where the mean positive (5 percentage points) and negative (-5 percentage points) changes in news saliency are used to predict vote intention, the

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[12] As mentioned in the research design section, news attention to owned and unowned issues is measured relative to all of the news in a given month. The results for opponent-owned issues are therefore not merely a mirror image of the results for owned issues. Note that the reported results do not change when the residual category of uncategorized (unowned or unknown ownership) news is included in the analysis.

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difference in vote intention at stake is still at 0.5 percentage points. When elections are competitive, major changes in the issue composition of the news could mean the difference between office and opposition. The results in Figure 4 and 5 add substantially to our basic argument behind Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that the priming effect in issue ownership theory depends heavily on the government/opposition status of the parties.

[Figure 4 and 5 around here]

The robustness of these findings has been assessed using a series of additional analyses. First, we examine the sensitivity of the results to alternative categorizations of issue ownership. Whereas the main findings reported above were based on eight issues covered by election surveys on issue ownership, we also estimated the models using all of the issues in the media dataset that could, based on survey measures supplemented by our knowledge of Danish party competition, be categorized as owned by one of the blocs. When using this augmented data set, the results are similar to those reported above (see table A.1 and figures A.1 and A.2 in supplemental material available online).

Second, a potential problem in our analysis could be that we approach issue ownership as static in this period. We have argued that this is a sound choice on the bloc level in the Danish context. Even at the bloc level, however, examples of shifts in ownership structures are observed. Most notably, Danish public opinion underwent some atypical changes in 2001, when the issue of health, previously a strong social democratic issue, was captured by the bourgeois bloc. Our data structure ignored this shift, potentially limiting the precision of our estimate of the priming effect under study. In order to check whether such shifts in ownership affect our results, we have constructed a new dataset in which the news features on health in 2001 are aggregated into the bourgeois-owned issue category. When estimating the interaction models on this alternative dataset, the priming effect is enhanced (see table B.1 and figures B.1 and B.2 in supplemental material available online). This implies that our focus on the long-term stability of issue ownership arguably constitutes a conservative test. More fine-grained investigations—where short-term variations in issue ownership are taken into account—could therefore add to the explanatory power of the priming effect.

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Third, given the focus of changes over time in debates about mediatization, we also took a closer look at the temporal dynamics by adding a time counter to the analyses presented above. Including a time counter does not affect the results, however, neither by itself nor when we interact the time counter with the original interaction term that estimates the priming effect (issue ownership × news saliency). Thus, arguments about increasing mediatization do not appear relevant to the priming effect in our period from 1984 to 2003, and neither are there indications of misspecification that relate to other temporal aspects of the estimated relationships.

Fourth, we have estimated a set of additional models to see how sensitive the results are to more specific changes in model assumptions. First, omitting all of the control variables from the analysis substantively yields the same results, but the priming effects become stronger (see table C.1 and figures C.1 and C.2 in supplemental material available online). Furthermore, an MLE estimation with robust standard errors reproduces the original results. A first-difference estimation in which we also include a lagged dependent variable provides substantively equivalent results, although the priming effects resulting from media attention to owned and opponent-owned issues are slightly weaker. Choosing a level model—instead of a first-difference model—with a lagged dependent variable produces stronger results for our key variables of interest (the interactions testing H1, H2, and H3).

Fifth, to assess the sensitivity of the results to changes in the structure of the data, we run similar models on a dataset in which the blocs are disaggregated to the party level and each of the eight issues are treated as separate panels. The three hypotheses still receive support, although the results are somewhat weaker in terms of effect size and statistical significance. This is hardly surprising given that our only available measurement of issue ownership is on the bloc level. The ownership profile of a bloc is obviously an aggregate measure that will represent some parties better than others. Consequently, the modelled mechanism of how the media primes issue ownership could easily be less precise on the level of individual parties. On the other hand, this supplementary analysis allows for a more precise testing of the expectations in the literature on economic voting as this model disinguishes between *parties*—and not only blocs—in office and opposition. In line with previous research, we find that downturns in the economy significantly

reduce the support for parties in office (see table D.1 and figures D.1 and D.2 in supplementary material available online).[13]

Finally, it is worth considering potential endogeneity problems with respect to the variables of interest in this study. The media agenda, for instance, is obviously not fully exogenous to voters and politics. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the media is fully aware of who holds office and that their norms and news values are geared towards monitoring and challenging incumbents (Green-Pedersen et al. 2015). On the other hand, it is arguably more far-fetched to claim that news institutions adapt to the continuous changes in party support by paying more attention to the issues owned by poll winners. To address this potential objection empirically, we utilize the time series data and run additional analyses that reveal how the effects reported in Table 2 also hold for lagged values of news saliency (see table E.1 in supplemental material available online).[14] With regards to the challenges of endogeneity more generally, we believe our approach is in fact an important supplement to extant studies based solely on survey data. The shared fear, so to speak, is that party choice explains which issues voters prioritize (and not the other way around). Should this be the case, then ownership of salient issues might be a less potent explanation of electoral changes than we think. However, finding that variations in the media agenda are followed by changes in party support that could be predicted by issue ownership theory arguably makes the theory even more reliable.

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[13] Another potential problem related to the structure of the dataset concerns the fact that observations on the dependent variable are interdependent; when government support goes up (down), opposition support goes down (up). We have therefore run additional models analyzing the government and opposition bloc separately. The results confirm our findings in the combined models (see table F.1 and figure F.1 and F.2 in supplemental material available online).

[14] To determine the number of lags to be included we ran Stata's *varsoc* test on the four different time series in our panel. Results indicate that 3-4 lags would be appropriate. Table E.1 shows the results of a model that – in addition to the variables in Model 1, Table 2 - includes three lags of the dependent variable (vote support), three lags of the independent variable (news saliency) as well as the relevant three interactions between the lagged news saliency variables and the issue ownership variable. Note that we have left out the model testing hypotheses 2 and 3, as it would be very hard to make sense of four three-ways interactions.

Conclusion

This article has two important messages regarding the priming mechanism central to most research related to issue ownership theory: it confirms the central idea that some issues are indeed more electorally favourable than others while at the same time pointing out the important conditional role of government responsibility. We have demonstrated this in a research design that takes the dynamic aspect of ownership theory into account. When the issue agenda surrounding voters changes, the balance between parties shifts in a manner consistent with the ownership claim. The media priming of issues matters for the support of political parties. The opposition has little to lose but much to gain from an issue-friendly media agenda. For the government, an issue-friendly media agenda offers—at best—a shelter against the losses that typically accompany policy responsibility. The ownership effect through media priming is clearly of such a size that it can mean the difference between office and opposition.

Our empirical test in the context of Denmark, covering month-to-month changes in the media agenda over a 20-year period, produced fairly strong results. While there are certainly other factors at play in the electoral calculus, many of them change very slowly and are therefore mostly relevant for explaining electoral stability (i.e. value orientations or social-structural predispositions). The literature on spatial modelling does find that parties change their policy positions as if voters will notice and follow, but evidence of the latter—that is, of the electoral consequences of policy shifts—remains weak and inconclusive (Adams 2012). Explanations of short-term changes in party support thus largely rests on the economic vote (cf. Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). In light of this, and considering that our approach to party support was based solely on the issue composition of the media agenda while controlling for economic conditions, we believe that the results provide strong testament to the issue ownership perspective on party competition.

On the other hand, even though we believe in the generalizability of the findings, it is likely that the exact nature of the mechanism will vary across both time and systems. Related to the former, an argument could be made that governing parties could profit electorally from attention to owned issues shortly before elections and in the so-called honeymoon period right after elections. Additional analyses do show traces of such effects in our data, but the results are unstable and mostly statistically insignificant. This could be

due to the relatively low number of elections in this period. Future studies should investigate such mechanisms in further detail. With regard to cross-system variation, it is important to keep in mind that ownership theory is a dynamic theory of issue voting developed partly in response to increased vote-switching. It would therefore seem plausible to expect that systems in which volatility is high should be more prone to changes in party support following changes in the media agenda. Future work could hopefully compare different systems, for instance based on existing knowledge about cross-country variations in electoral volatility (Dejaeghere and Dassonneville 2015).

Although future research should broaden our understanding of the media priming and ownership mechanism, the conclusion thus far is that party competition—and consequently also electoral results—depend on which issues receive media attention. In this sense, the article confirms the assumptions underlying studies of party behavior based on the idea of issue ownership. Given the results of this article, it is no surprise that parties place much effort into influencing the issue content of campaigns and public debate. Our study suggests that it is also vital to affect the agenda between elections and that the parties that succeed in this work—or for other reasons are fortunate in terms of the news agenda—will profit electorally.

Furthermore, the different effects on the voter support for government and opposition parties, respectively, may give rise to new research questions concerning the strategic promotion and blocking of issues. If the opposition does indeed benefit from attention to owned issues, this may imply that they are more concerned with promoting own issues than blocking government-owned issues, whereas the government parties may adopt more defensive strategies aimed mainly at limiting attention to opposition-owned issues.

As a final note, the importance of media attention documented in this study inevitably raises the question of what determines the issue agenda of the news media. Political parties can clearly influence which issues get into the news. For instance, it is well-established that the news media "index" politics in the sense that issues that receive attention from political actors are more likely to figure prominently in the news (Bennett 1990; Bennett et al. 2007). However, *influencing* does not mean *determining*; real world events play a crucial role and are largely beyond the control of political actors. Furthermore, the media

coverage of politics is strongly coloured by how the modern mass media function through news criteria and other journalistic norms. In other words, we must examine whether news selection processes introduce (party) political biases into electoral competition, for instance by the increased dominance of commercial news values (Landerer 2013) that ultimately might favor some issues over others. But this is not merely a question about which issues dominate the news and which parties own these issues; it is certainly also about how these issues—and the political actors that try to promote them—are framed in the news. News norms, for instance, are crucial for how the news media cover government and opposition parties (Green-Pedersen et al. 2015). Further research on how parties try to influence the news agenda must therefore take into account how the strategic efforts made by parties interact with the way modern mass media work.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Issue categories and issue ownership. Mean electoral advantage in surveys of issue competence.*

Issue category	Bourgeois advantage	Social Democratic advantage
Economy	18.6	
Immigration	18.3	
Law and order, crime	29.5	
Business, industry, and consumer issues	17.2	
Health**		2.7
Labour market and unemployment		25.0
Environment		47.3
Social welfare and family		21.9

* Percentage of voters assigning competence ownership to bloc A minus percentage of voters assigning competence ownership to bloc B.

** If we exclude 2001, when the bourgeois bloc managed to capture ownership of health (with a 12 percentage point margin), the Social Democratic advantage equals 10 percentage points (increasing to almost 25 percentage points after our period of investigation).

Table 2. Models explaining vote intention (support for Social Democratic bloc and support for bourgeois bloc). Monthly data, Denmark, 1984-2003. First-difference models.

	(1) Δ Voter support (*Hypothesis 1*)	(2) Δ Voter support (*Hypotheses 2 and 3*)
Main variables:		
$\Delta NS_{i,t}$ (news saliency)	–0.019	0.007
	(0.013)	(0.018)
IO_i (issue ownership)	–0.001	–0.001
	(0.104)	(0.147)
BO_t (bloc in office)	–0.209	–0.208
	(0.145)	(0.178)
$\Delta NS_{i,t} \times IO_t{}^a$	0.049**	0.038
	(0.018)	(0.026)
$BO_t \times IO_t{}^a$		–0.000
		(0.208)
$BO_t \times \Delta NS$		–0.053*
		(0.026)
$BO_t \times \Delta NS_{i,t} \times IO_i{}^a$		0.023
		(0.036)
Controls:		
Social Democratic bloc	–0.075	–0.078
	(0.111)	(0.110)
Bloc change in 1993	–5.669***	–5.755***
	(1.143)	(1.143)
Social democratic bloc × bloc change	15.123***	15.203***
	(1.622)	(1.620)
Δ Economy	–0.516	–0.516
	(0.518)	(0.517)
Δ Economy × bloc in office	1.058	1.057
	(0.752)	(0.750)
Constant	0.139	0.141
	(0.135)	(0.144)
Residual deviation	2.583***	2.575***
	(0.119)	(0.119)
N	956	956
Wald chi2	106.6***	112.6***
Log restricted-likelihood	–1815.4	–1818.7

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$. [a] Opponent-owned issues used as reference category.

Fig. 1. Ownership of the media agenda, Denmark 1984-2003. Percentage of issues in the news owned by the bourgeois and Social Democratic blocs
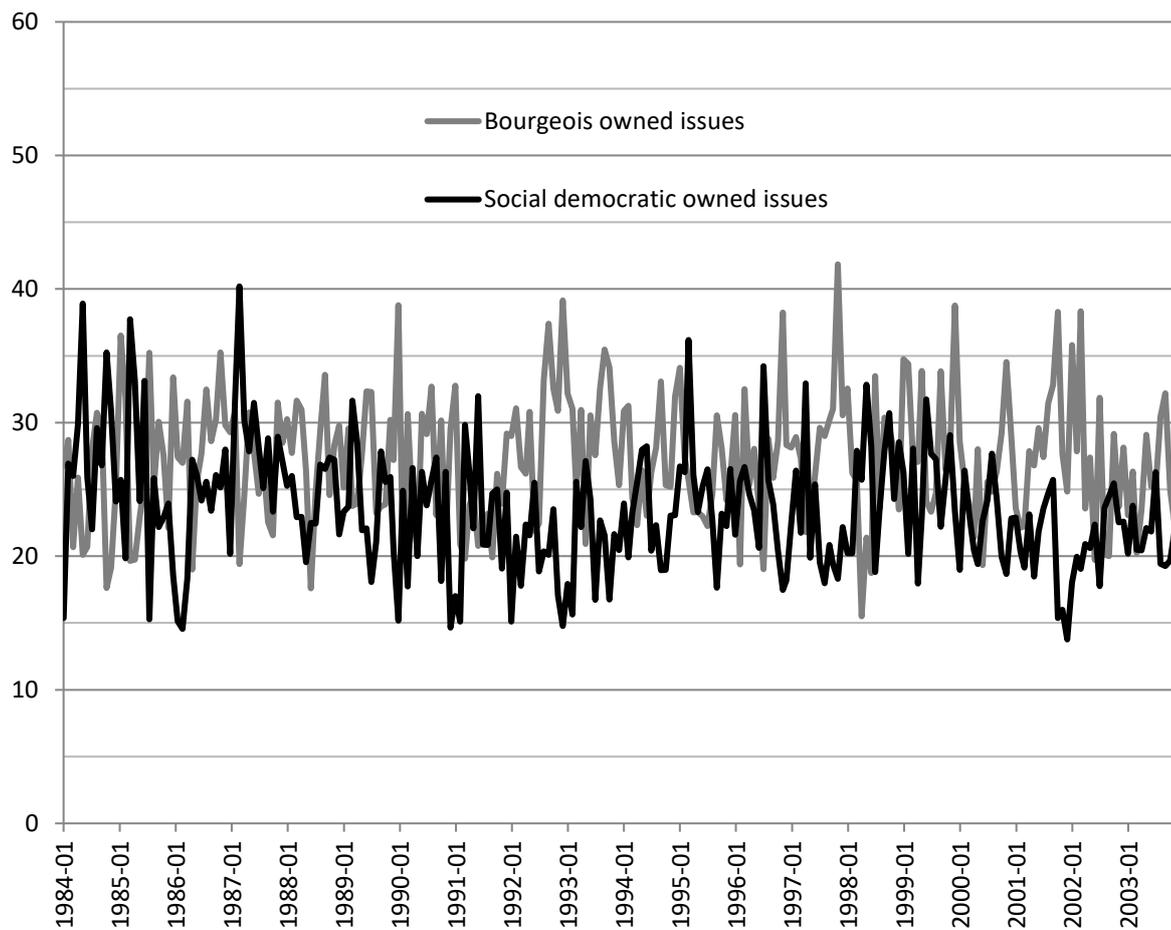
Fig. 2. Vote intention (percentages) for Social Democratic and bourgeois blocs, Denmark 1984-2003
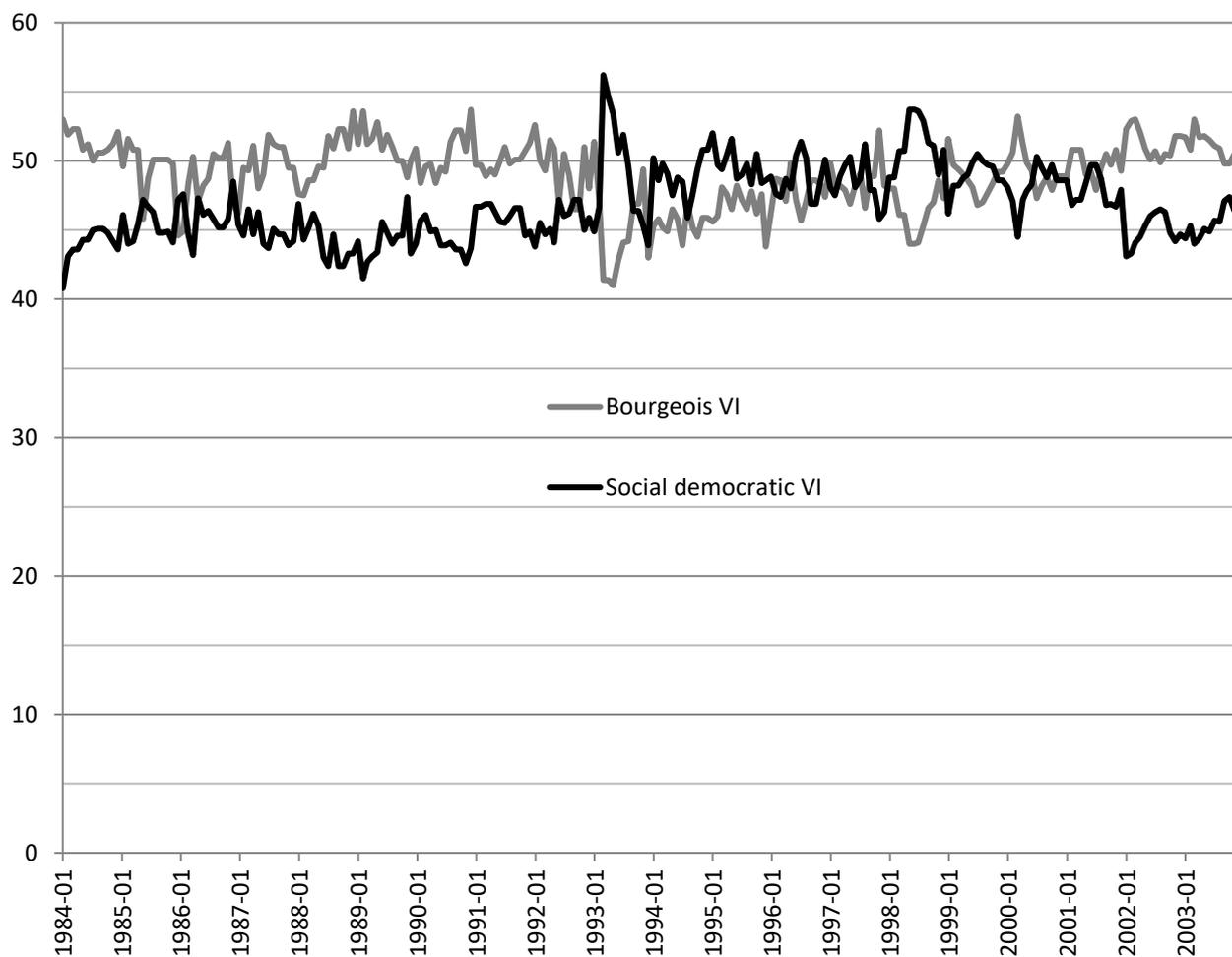
Fig 3. Predicted change in vote intention (bloc support) when news saliency changes for owned and opponent-owned issues
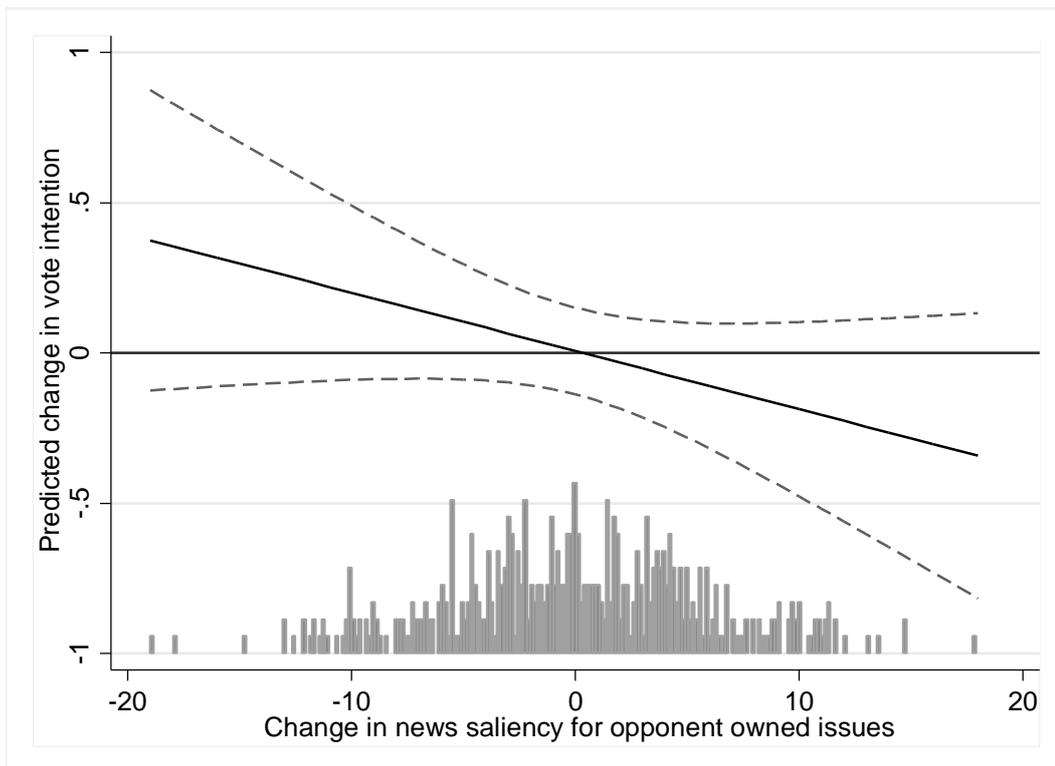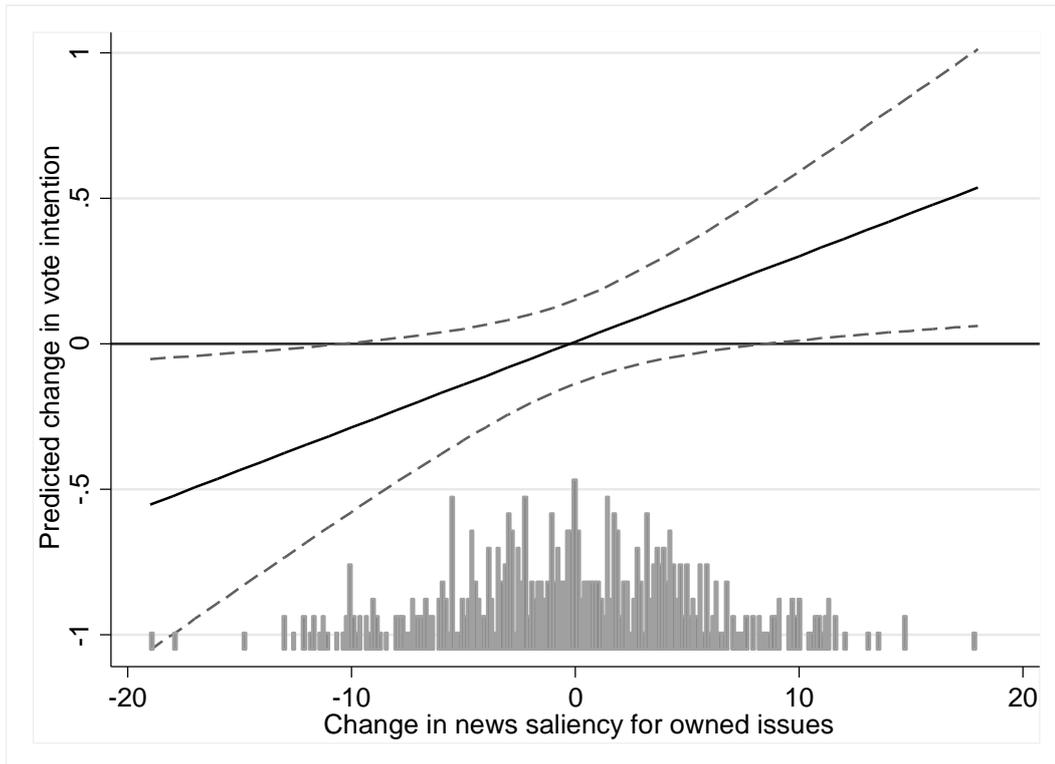
Fig 4. Predicted change in vote intention for bloc in opposition when news saliency changes for owned and opponent-owned issues
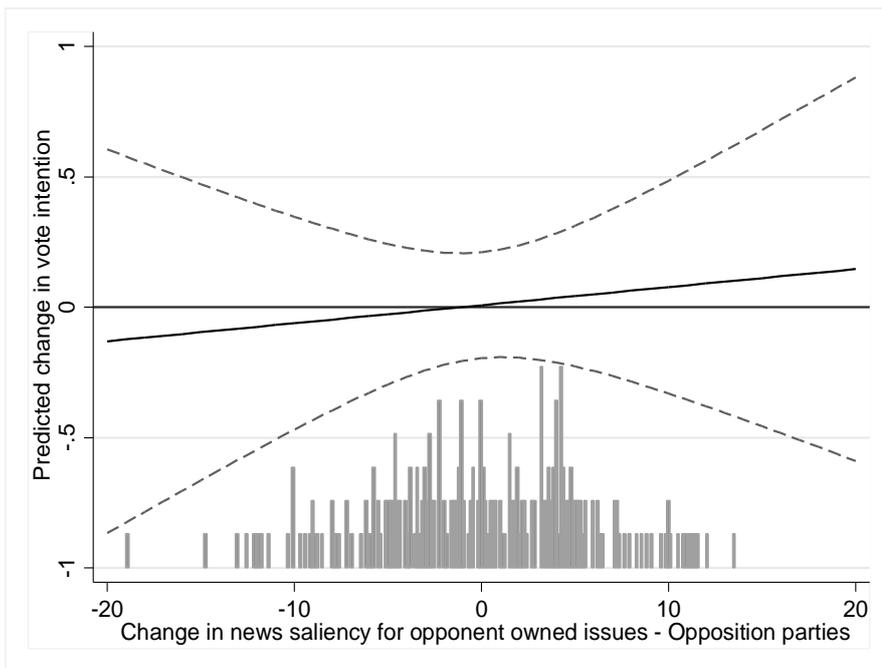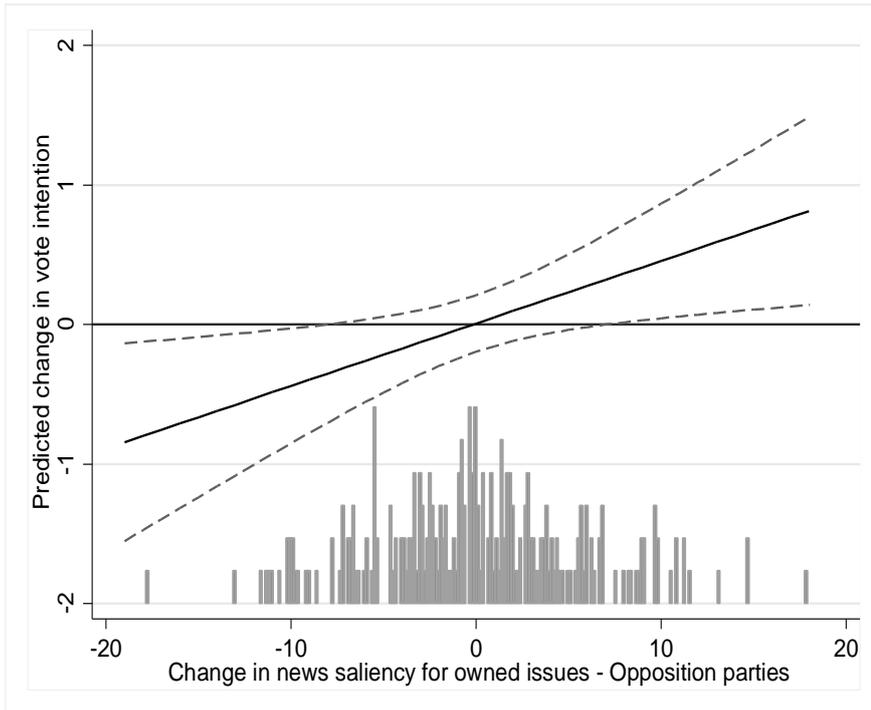
Fig 5. Predicted change in vote intention for bloc in office when news saliency changes for owned and opponent-owned issues