

Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice

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Abstract

According to the issue ownership theory of voting, voters identify the most credible party proponent of a particular issue and cast their ballots for that issue owner. Despite the centrality of this voter-level mechanism to ownership theories of party behavior, it has seldom been examined in the literature. We explore this model and offer a refinement to its current understanding and operationalization. Returning to the roots of ownership theory, we argue that the effect of issue ownership on vote choice is conditioned by the perceived salience of the issue in question. Through individual-level analyses of vote choice in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections, we demonstrate that issue ownership affects the voting decisions of only those individuals who think that the issue is salient. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The observed decline in the explanatory power of sociological determinants of vote choice over the past few decades has prompted scholars to consider more closely the role of political issues in individual electoral decisions. One explanation of issue-based vote choice that has emerged revolves around the idea of issue ownership (e.g., Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). According to this theory, parties and their candidates attempt to mobilize voters by emphasizing issues on which they hold a reputation of competence. Political parties in turn receive support on the basis of those issues that they are perceived to own at election time.

In this article, we consider a refinement to the current understanding of issue ownership voting. We turn to

a factor that has been explored in standard models of issue voting, but surprisingly has received little attention as an independent variable in the literature on ownership-based voting behavior—issue salience. While party ownership of an issue is important to individual vote choice, we suggest that its effect is conditioned by the perceived salience of the issue in question. Specifically, we argue that a party's competence on an issue should not influence voter behavior unless the issue is considered important. By making the role of issue salience more explicit both in the formulation of the issue ownership theory of voting and in its empirical testing, we hope to provide an explanation of issue-based voting that is more complete and representative of actual voter behavior. Our re-examination of voter decision making thus aims to bring individual-level issue ownership voting research more in line with the original aggregate-level issue ownership theory, which included saliency in its formulation (Budge and Farlie, 1983).

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We begin by reviewing the previous work on issue ownership. We then discuss our refinement of the issue ownership voting model and test it by analyzing the individual-level determinants of vote choice in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections. The results support the hypothesis that issue salience acts as a conditioning variable in the relationship between issue ownership and vote choice.

1. The role of issue ownership in party and voter behavior

In seeking to understand the dynamics of party and voter competition, scholars have noted that political parties are viewed as more than just the set of policy preferences they promote in their campaign documents and speeches for a given election. Parties have issue reputations. These images are initially based on the policy stances they adopt and the constituencies they seek to attract. But the party's issue handling reputation is further shaped—"regularly tested and reinforced," to quote [Petrocik \(1996: 828\)](#)—by the performance of the party once in office.

Examples of issue reputations abound. For instance, in the United States, the Democratic Party is known as the party best able to deal with issues of education, welfare, and civil rights, whereas the Republican Party historically has been seen as the party most competent at handling foreign affairs, national defense, and crime ([Petrocik, 1996](#)). Similar reputations exist in the United Kingdom, where the Labour Party is seen as the party most competent at managing health care and education, and the Conservatives typically enjoy a positive image with regard to taxes, crime, and defense issues ([Budge and Farlie, 1983](#)).

These observations from the US and UK cases motivated the theory of issue ownership developed by [Budge and Farlie \(1983\)](#) and [Petrocik \(1996\)](#).¹ The theory's aim is twofold. Its first objective is to provide an explanation of party (and candidate) behavior that focuses on the issues that are put forward by parties during election campaigns. The theoretical expectation is that parties place greater emphasis on issues that they "own." They do so in order to appear credible to voters: the issues being primed by a party have to be consistent with the party's long-standing image (see also [Alesina, 1988](#); [Bowler, 1990](#)).

¹ This model constitutes a logical extension of earlier work done on party images and the issues parties emphasize during campaigns ([Re-Pass, 1971](#); [Stokes, 1963](#); [Trilling, 1976](#)).

The theory's second goal is to provide an account of voter behavior based on the role of issue ownership in elections. According to that aspect of the theory, individuals make their voting decision by evaluating the competence that each party has in handling specific issues. Voters, the theory argues, can identify the party (or candidate) that they feel is the most competent, or the most credible, proponent of a particular issue. They then cast their ballots for the issue owner. For example, in the American context, if parties highlight the issue of health care, voters will evaluate the competence of each party on that issue. Because the Democrats are generally considered the owner of health care, voters will most likely prefer the Democratic Party over the Republican Party, on the basis of that issue. In this respect, ownership-based issue voting requires less information than proximity or directional theories of issue voting (e.g., [Downs, 1957](#); [Merrill and Grofman, 1999](#); [Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989](#)); according to the ownership model, voters only need to assess which party is the owner of the primed issue.

The existing research has focused mainly on the theory's first goal—to explain party and candidate behavior. While some studies find that candidates' behavior is shaped by the issues that are salient at election time, sometimes regardless of their ownership (see [Aldrich and Griffin, 2003](#); [Damore, 2004](#)), others report strong evidence that issue ownership is an important dimension of electoral campaigns and party behavior, especially in the United States ([Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994](#); [Hayes, 2005](#); [Petrocik et al., 2003](#); [Sellers, 1998](#); [Simon, 2002](#)). The latter studies show that parties actively compete to acquire and defend their issue ownership. Issue ownership has proven to be more fluid and contested than initially assumed; parties compete over new issues ([Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004](#)), and candidates try to steal issue ownership from their opponents, by reframing issues ([Holian, 2004](#)) or appealing to their strong personal record in those issue areas ([Kaufmann, 2004](#)). Yet, parties nonetheless tend to strategically emphasize those issues on which they are perceived (at least for the moment) to be more competent.

These studies are primarily concerned with the supply side of issue ownership and the campaign process. Issue ownership *voting*—the second dimension of the ownership theory, which concerns us directly in this article—is seldom examined in these studies or in the literature in general. At this writing, only a handful of studies have provided an empirical test of the relationship between issue ownership and voter behavior. In their initial investigation of their ownership theory, [Budge and Farlie \(1983\)](#) demonstrate that knowledge

of parties' issue ownership can help predict parties' electoral support in 23 democracies. Their analysis is restricted to the aggregate level, however, and does not test their individual-level hypotheses about individuals' voting decisions.

Subsequent scholars have focused explicitly on the role of issue ownership in individual-level voter choice. Looking at survey data from the 1998 Dutch parliamentary election, van der Brug (2004) finds that issue ownership only affects voter party preferences indirectly. He argues that party competence serves to alter voters' perceptions of the party's position on the left-right spectrum. This, in turn, colors their party preferences. But the reliability and generalizability of his results are hindered by his unusual operationalization of party ownership² and his use of "electoral utilities" rather than vote choice as the dependent variable.³ In the other extant studies, Nadeau et al. (2001), Clarke et al. (2004), and Bellucci (2006) do find evidence of the direct impact of perceptions of party competence on individual vote choice in Canadian, British, and Italian elections, respectively. For instance, Nadeau et al. (2001) demonstrate that perceived competence at handling the issues of job creation, crime, welfare, and national unity significantly increased support for the federal Liberal Party of Canada in the 1997 election, beyond the effects of other, usual determinants of voter choice. These studies thus lend support to the claim made by the issue ownership theory that citizens take issue-handling reputations into account when deciding which party to vote for.

1.1. A refinement: issue salience conditions issue ownership voting

In moving from the articulation and testing of an ownership theory of candidate behavior to the conceptualization and (limited) examination of the theory of voter behavior underlying it, the recent literature seems to have downplayed or even ignored the role of a critical variable. That factor is issue salience.⁴

² He looks at the proximity between parties and voters in terms of their issue priorities.

³ Van der Brug (2004: 215) defines "electoral utility" as "the degree of utility a voter would derive from voting for a party." See also van der Eijk et al. (2006).

⁴ Issue salience is not a variable unknown to standard (i.e., non-ownership) models of issue voting. While several studies (e.g., Hinckley et al., 1974; Markus and Converse, 1979; Niemi and Bartels, 1985) find that salience has no direct effect on voting behavior, issue salience has been shown to have an important conditioning effect in other models of issue voting (e.g., Edwards et al., 1995; Fournier et al., 2003; Krosnick, 1988, 1990; Rabinowitz et al., 1982).

We advocate a return to the ideas first put forward by Budge and Farlie, but tested only in their aggregate analysis of electoral outcomes. Following their lead, we argue that the impact of issue reputation on an individual's vote choice is conditioned by issue salience. In other words, issue ownership should only affect the decision of those voters who think that the issue in question is important. Indeed, why should knowing that the Democrats (or Labour in Britain, or the Liberals in Canada) are the owner of the health care issue matter for an individual's vote if she thinks that health care is an irrelevant issue?

The existence of this conditional effect of salience on issue ownership voting has been noted by a few studies. Budge and Farlie's accurate predictions of shifts in bourgeois and socialist party vote levels across democracies from 1977 to 1979 are based on knowledge of the party's ownership of *salient* issues. While less central to their analysis, the existence of a similar relationship is hinted at by Mayer and Tiberj (2004) in their examination of issues in the 2002 French presidential election. They conclude that, while most French voters already considered Le Pen's Front National as the party best able to handle crime as of 1995, this factor probably bolstered that party's vote share in 2002 because the issue of insecurity suddenly became highly salient (see also Martin, 1998 for a similar reasoning). In terms of individual-level analyses, RePass (1971) observes that voters perceive sharper differences among political parties' issue-handling capacities on those issues that are salient to them; this conclusion is also a central implication of the more recent work on issue publics (e.g., Anand and Krosnick, 2003; Price and Zaller, 1993). The fact that respondents to many national election studies, including the 1998 and 2000 American National Election Studies and the 2001 and 2005 British Election Studies, were asked to identify the best party only on the issue they found to be most important reflects the natural connection between these two concepts.

But in most discussions and models of individual-level issue ownership voting, issue salience remains an implicit dimension at best.⁵ This is particularly surprising given the prominent role of issue salience in the ownership model of *candidate* behavior and

⁵ While Damore (2004: 392) does not examine the implications of the issue ownership theory for voter behavior, his model of candidate behavior rests on the assumption that salience plays a role in issue-based vote choice.

in Budge and Farlie's (1983) aggregate model of ownership election forecasting, and the mounting evidence that there is rarely a consensus among issue voters on the importance of political issues (e.g., Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Petrocik et al., 2003; Rivers, 1988).⁶ With issue priorities varying across voters and not directly reflecting the agenda of the political parties, it follows that ownership-based voters will support different parties, based on the issues that they find to be salient. However, neither van der Brug (2004) nor Nadeau et al. (2001) examine issue salience in their analyses of issue ownership voting. Bellucci (2006) is a rare example of someone including both salience and ownership in a single model of vote choice, but he does not explicitly model the conditionality of these variables. While Clarke et al.'s (2004) models of voter choice in the 2001 British general election examine ownership when the issue in question is salient and thus might appear to be an exception to our claim above, the authors do not discuss the relationship between issue salience and issue ownership. Moreover, because they include measures of ownership for only salient issues, their models cannot tell us about the conditional nature of issue ownership voting.⁷

To understand issue ownership-based voting, we argue, issue salience has to be fully integrated into the formulation of the theory and its empirical testing. Summarizing our claims, we expect that the effect of issue ownership on individual vote choice is conditional upon the perceived salience of the issue. If the issue is not salient, ownership should not affect party support. If the issue is salient, ownership should have an effect on vote choice. Moreover, the more salient the issue, the greater the expected effect of issue ownership on an individual's voting decision.

2. Data and methods

To test this conditional formulation of the issue ownership theory of voting, we examine individual-level vote choice in the 1997 and 2000 federal elections in Canada. The Canadian case and these elections in particular are attractive for both empirical

and theoretical reasons. First and foremost, an extensive survey of national election studies across countries reveals that only the Canadian Election Study (CES) surveys allow us to adequately test the ownership conditionality hypotheses. Indeed, no other individual-level national election study provides measures of respondents' perceptions of both issue salience and party reputation on a common set of policy issues.⁸ An effort is underway to collect such data in the United States, the main geographic focus of research on issue ownership; however, to date, this revised formulation of the ownership theory of voting can only be tested using Canadian data.

Beyond serving our practical needs, the Canadian case is theoretically appealing. Like many advanced industrial democracies, Canada has a multidimensional political environment, which allows us to examine the ownership effects of several distinct issues. The multiplicity of issues also increases the likelihood that there will be greater variation in the perceived salience of those issues across voters, thus providing a stronger test of our hypotheses. Examination of vote choice in Canada also provides a good test of the transportability of the issue ownership concepts. Whereas most work on issue ownership has been restricted to two-party systems, Canada had five main parties at that time and has less consensus among the electorate on issue-handling competence. There is already some evidence from Nadeau et al. (2001) that (unconditional) issue ownership voting occurs in Canada, but our study provides an opportunity to see if voters in this multiparty system still base their decisions on issue ownership when issue salience is properly taken into account.

2.1. Dependent variable

In our pooled analyses of vote choice in the 1997 and 2000 elections, the dependent variable is vote choice as reported in the 1997 and 2000 CES.⁹ Five main parties competed in the June 1997 Canadian federal election: the incumbent Liberal Party, the Progressive-Conservative Party (PC), the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Reform Party, and the Bloc Québécois. The same five parties competed in the November

⁶ Issue priorities may reflect an individual's values or self-interest or the social group with which the person identifies (see Krosnick, 1990).

⁷ This limitation is also present in Budge and Farlie's (1983) aggregate analysis; they only explore the effect of ownership of salient issues on election outcomes.

⁸ Only the 1997 and 2000 CES ask these questions; comparably worded questions on issue salience and ownership were not asked in previous or later waves of the CES.

⁹ Data from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies were obtained from the Canadian Election Study website (<http://ces-ec.mcgill.ca/surveys.html>).

2000 election, the only difference being that the Reform Party had been renamed the Canadian Alliance.¹⁰ We examine the effects of salience and ownership of four issues on voting behavior in the two electoral contests. Those issues are cutting taxes, protecting social programs, creating jobs, and fighting crime. These represent the set of issues common to both the 1997 and 2000 CES.¹¹

The decision to merge the two CES together for our analyses rests upon several factors. The 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections were very similar with, as will be discussed in the following section, the same players, issues, general perceptions of issue competences, and even electoral outcomes. In both federal elections, the incumbent Liberal Party was re-elected, and the opposition vote was split between four parties. In addition, and not surprisingly given the above, the merged empirical results were virtually identical to those that were obtained for the two elections individually. Whenever possible, in the findings section we note additional tests conducted separately for the two elections.

2.2. Independent variables

2.2.1. Issue salience

For the purpose of explaining vote choice from the point of view of issue ownership theory, it is critical to know what voters think are the most important issues and the most competent parties on those issues. In both surveys, issue salience is measured by the following closed-ended question: “How important are the following issues to you personally in this election?” For each issue, respondents were asked to rate the importance they attached to the issue by choosing between the following answers: very important, somewhat

important, or not very important.¹² We represent respondents’ perceptions of issue salience as trichotomous variables, with “very important” coded 2, “somewhat important” coded 1, and “not very important” coded 0.¹³

The “don’t know” responses were excluded. Few respondents—less than 4.5% of the national sample across both CES surveys—answered “don’t know” to the issue salience questions, indicating that almost everyone was able to estimate the extent to which each issue was important to them. In the aggregate, the political issue that was most salient to the Canadian public across the two elections was the creation of jobs (77% said it was “very important” to them personally), followed by crime (71%), social programs (49%), and tax cuts (48%).¹⁴ In the pooled survey data, the issue salience variables are only weakly correlated with one another, with Pearson’s *R*s between -0.02 and 0.26 depending on the pair of issues. Consistent with the findings of Rivers (1988) and Krosnick (1990), these results suggest that a substantial degree of heterogeneity exists in voters’ individual evaluations of the salience of these issues.

2.2.2. Issue ownership

Following the practices of Nadeau et al. (2001), Clarke et al. (2004), and Bellucci (2006), we use survey respondents’ perceptions of party competence as measures of issue ownership. Issue ownership is determined by the following CES question: “In your view, which party would be best at ...?” For each of the issues discussed above, respondents were thus asked to name which party (if any) they considered to be the most competent at handling the issue. Consistent with Nadeau et al. (2001), we recode responses into three-point scales for each party and each issue: the respondent is coded +1 if she thinks that the given party is the most competent on the given issue, -1 if she thinks that *another* party is the most competent, and 0 if she finds no particular party to be competent. For example, if a respondent names the Liberals as the party best able to create jobs,

¹⁰ The Reform party was renamed the Canadian Alliance approximately six months before the 2000 election. The new party elected a new leader and slightly changed its party platform so as to broaden its electoral appeal. But this did little to change the public’s perception that it was still an extremist social conservative party from the West (Blais et al., 2002).

¹¹ Issue salience and ownership questions were asked about seven issues in the 1997 CES and nine issues in the 2000 CES. A fifth common issue across the two studies—defending the interests of Quebec—could not be included in our analysis for several reasons. Not only was that question asked only of those surveyed in Quebec, making it not comparable to the other issues in the analysis, but also the CES surveys lacked a clear measure of the respondent’s position on that controversial policy good. As we will discuss in the section on independent variables, information on voter policy preferences is necessary for properly testing the ownership theory on non-valence issues.

¹² The issue salience question format we use (i.e., how important is a given issue) is preferable to the open-ended format which asks which issue “is the most important” because it avoids the problems associated with the commonly used “most important problem” question (see Wlezien, 2005).

¹³ The results of the analysis are robust to the use of an alternate coding specification for the salience variables, where “very” and “somewhat important” are coded 1 and “not very important” is coded 0.

¹⁴ The aggregate ordering of the issue priorities across the two elections is the same if one looks at the percentages of respondents who deemed the issues to be “very” or “somewhat important.”

then the jobs ownership variable for the Liberal Party takes on the value of +1 (for that respondent), and the four other jobs ownership variables take on the value of -1 (for that same respondent). If, on the other hand, that respondent is unable or unwilling to name any party as most competent on the jobs issue, then her score on all five jobs ownership variables would be 0.

Analysis of the CES survey data confirms that respondents can identify issue owners—a precondition for the issue ownership model of voting. As [Table 1](#) shows, between 78% and 88% of individuals surveyed in 1997 and 2000 find one party or another to be the most competent on each of these issues.¹⁵ The Liberals were deemed the owner of the jobs issue by a wide margin of survey respondents. Ownership of the other issues was more contested. The NDP received the largest share of the responses for owner of the social programs issue, ahead of the Liberal Party. Likewise, the Reform/Alliance was identified as being most competent on the issue of taxes, but only just ahead of the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives. Across the survey respondents, not one but two parties emerged as the owner of the crime issue. Competition for ownership of this issue was the most fierce with both the Liberal and the Reform/Alliance parties receiving 25% of the survey responses.

These findings highlight that there is rarely a clear-cut consensus about the ownership of issues in this five party system. Indeed, as shown in [Table 1](#), at most 35% of respondents agree on the ownership of a particular issue. Such variation in perceptions of issue ownership can be seen, to a lesser extent, over time. If we disaggregate the data by election, we find stability in the, albeit somewhat contested, ownership of the social programs and jobs issues; these titles are consistently held by the NDP and Liberals, respectively. On the other hand, between 1997 and 2000, the plurality shifts slightly within the set of parties closely associated with the taxes and crime issues. The PC takes the lead on taxes in 1997 whereas the Alliance is ahead in 2000. Similarly, the Liberals are seen as the owner of the crime issue by a plurality of 26% in 1997; the Alliance emerges as its owner in 2000 with 30% of responses.

Such variation in perceptions of issue competence has led some scholars to criticize the general use of “party best at” questions for measuring issue ownership (e.g., [Kuechler, 1991](#); [van der Brug, 2004](#)). Their argument is that this survey question provides

¹⁵ These percentages include respondents answering that no party was owner.

Table 1

Perceptions of issue ownership in Canada for the 1997 and 2000 federal elections (columns as percentage of total sample^a)

	Taxes	Social programs	Jobs	Crime
Liberals	23	26	35	25
PC	20	10	15	10
NDP	7	33	11	5
Reform/Alliance	27	9	14	25
Bloc Québécois	4	5	5	6
Other/None	7	5	8	7
DK	11	11	13	21

Source: 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies. Bold numbers indicate the issue owner(s).

^a Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

a subjective, as opposed to an objective, measure of issue ownership. Not only does this allow for variability across individual respondents as seen above, but also, they argue, the resulting survey responses are likely to be reflections of partisanship.

Focusing on the second concern first, we too find patterns suggesting that partisan identification does, to some extent, inform perceptions of ownership in the CES data. For instance, across the two elections, 15% of respondents systematically named the same party as most competent on all four issues;¹⁶ this proportion is 8% among non-identifiers, while it is 21% among party identifiers (who tend to name their own party). Also, non-identifiers are about twice as likely as party identifiers to answer “don’t know” to questions about competence, although the total number of “don’t know” answers in itself is not particularly high.¹⁷

However, the advantages to using this measure in our current study outweigh the disadvantages. First, this question captures more directly the underlying concept of party ownership in Canada than other questions available in this survey or those employed by others in similar research. The practice of using “objective” measures of issue ownership typical to studies of candidate behavior in the US (e.g., [Hayes, 2005](#); [Petrocik, 1996](#))¹⁸ is problematic because there lacks a clear consensus about the “true” owners of particular issues in the Canadian political system.¹⁹ In this multiparty system where more

¹⁶ The percentage of people naming the same party for all four issues was 15.4% for the 1997 election and 14.8% for the 2000 election.

¹⁷ The percentage of “don’t know” responses in the dataset ranged from 11% to 13%, except for crime (21%); see [Table 1](#).

¹⁸ This practice is also employed by [Budge and Farlie \(1983\)](#) in their aggregate tests of the ownership theory of voting in 23 countries.

¹⁹ In this case, following the practice employed in US research to obtain “objective” measures would entail according the title of issue owner to the party gaining the plurality of responses.

parties are compelled to occupy a limited issue space, party positions overlap, and multiple parties actively compete for these titles (Bélanger, 2003).

Second, it has recently been questioned whether any consensus exists around issue reputations even in the two-party system of the United States. Damore (2004), Holian (2004), Kaufmann (2004) and Petrocik et al. (2003) have reported that the ownership of issues varies across the two main American parties over time. There is also evidence that, at any given time in the US, there is disagreement over the identity of an issue's owner. A cursory examination of the survey data presented in several analyses of issue ownership, including Petrocik's seminal, 1996 article, reveals that *all* issue handling reputations are contested, with many being awarded to a party on the basis of less than 50% of survey responses. Thus, with even research on American issue ownership challenging the "objective" reputation concept of ownership first articulated by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996), we would hardly expect singular, invariable, and universally agreed upon owners of given issues in the Canadian context.

Similarly, the measure of issue ownership in the CES surveys improves upon the indicators employed by other scholars conducting individual-level analyses. For example, van der Brug (2004) claims to avoid the potential bias inherent in these questions by using information on the issue priorities of voters and parties to tap into issue ownership. Yet, the questions he uses are only informative of issue ownership *if* one makes the further strong assumption that parties only give priority to issues that they own. This is a central hypothesis of the issue ownership theory—one that needs to be tested, not asserted. Recent studies of candidate behavior in the US (see Aldrich and Griffin, 2003; Damore, 2004) have challenged this claim, and even the original proponents of issue ownership theory have argued that this hypothesis does not necessarily hold with regard to all issues. Budge and Farlie (1983) note that political parties typically emphasize a common set of major issues in a given election campaign, even if their credibility on those issues varies. It is the goal of our research to assess the impact of issue ownership as distinct from issue salience, and, thus, we need to employ a measure of voter perceptions of party issue competence.

Even if there is a correlation between partisanship and "party best at" survey responses, the extent to which it is problematic for this analysis should not be overstated. Almost half (45%) of the sample did not self-identify as a strong or very strong partisan of any

party. Of those who did, many partisan identifiers were willing to name a party other than their own as issue owner. The proportion of partisans not naming their party as most competent is about 37% on the jobs issue, 50% on crime, 51% on social programs, and 52% on taxes. Perceptions of party competence, thus, are far from being entirely predetermined by partisan identification.²⁰

A further complication of testing the effects of issue ownership stems from the choice and framing of issues presented in the 1997 and 2000 CES. The ownership theory of voting assumes that voters are casting their ballots on the basis of valence issues. These are issues on which all actors share a common policy stance, but may disagree about the means of achieving them (Stokes, 1963). In this analysis, "increasing jobs" and "fighting crime" can be treated as valence issues. However, the other two issues, "cutting taxes" and "preserving social programs," do not fit this definition. Decreasing taxes and protecting social programs are not universally agreed upon goals.

For this second set of issues, known as position issues, the theory's claim that issue ownership should lead directly to vote choice does not necessarily apply. If an individual does not share a party's issue stance, then it is irrelevant that she finds that particular party to be the owner of the policy position. For example, if a voter does not favor tax cuts, then the fact that the Reform/Alliance party owns that issue should not increase that voter's probability of supporting it. Consequently, to properly test the ownership theory in the case of these two position issues, we create a new set of variables that measure issue ownership *given* a respondent's shared preferences on that issue.²¹

2.3. Model estimation

To estimate the effects of issue salience and ownership on individual-level vote choice, we pool the data

²⁰ While acknowledging that a projection effect is real, previous work done in the US (Petrocik, 1996; RePass, 1971; Trilling, 1976) and Canada (Bélanger, 2003; Meisel, 1972; Nadeau and Blais, 1990; Nadeau et al., 2001) has also shown that questions about the "party best at" do reveal genuine party images of issue competence once contamination from party identification is controlled for. Thus, to eliminate or reduce potential bias due to projection or rationalization effects, we follow the practices of the scholars cited above and systematically include controls for partisanship in all of our analyses (see our next section).

²¹ These variables were created by interacting the three-level ownership scales with dichotomous variables indicating the respondent's support for (1) or opposition to (0) the given issue position.

from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies and conduct a series of logistic regressions for each party's vote. This form of analysis is chosen over a multinomial logit because it allows us to test the effect of negative issue ownership separate from that of no issue ownership (using three-point ownership scales) for each party and each issue. In each logit regression, we analyze the likelihood that a respondent to the 1997 or the 2000 CES voted for one of the five main federal parties. As explanatory variables, we include measures of salience (*S*) and party ownership (*O*) for each of the issues discussed previously. Recall that for the two position issues—cutting taxes and protecting social programs—the influence of ownership on vote choice depends on the voter's programmatic preferences. As an advancement over past analyses of Canadian issue ownership, we therefore include interactive terms to measure the ownership of these position issues given a respondent's preference on that issue ($O \times \text{Pref}$).²² A further set of interactive variables is added to test our central claim that the impact of issue ownership is conditional upon issue salience ($S \times O$).²³ Finally, we include a set of control variables found to be informative of recent Canadian electoral behavior (see Blais et al., 2002; Nevitte et al., 2000). These socio-demographic factors consist of age, gender, education, income, religion, and region. We also add a dummy variable for the election year.²⁴

Given that partisans are more likely to consider their party as the owner of an issue, we need to

control for the effect of partisanship when estimating our models. We follow the dominant practice and introduce party identification controls to the logit models. To confirm the robustness of our findings, we also conducted the same analyses on only nonpartisans, i.e., those respondents who are not already predisposed to vote for any party. The results of those regressions, which are reported in the Appendix (Table A.1), support the same substantive conclusions suggested by Table 2.

3. Findings

Table 2 contains the results of our analyses of party vote in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections. The values in the table are the coefficients of the logistic regressions of vote for each of the five Canadian parties.

What factors influence vote choice? Turning our attention first to the control variables, we find that voter decisions are influenced by partisan affiliation and socio-demographic factors. Consistent with past analyses of the 1997 and 2000 CES data (e.g., Blais et al., 2002; Nadeau et al., 2001; Nevitte et al., 2000), the partisanship variables are statistically significant and exhibit strong, positive influences over vote choice for every party. Following a trend witnessed in past elections in Canada and elsewhere (see Dalton, 1996; Gidengil et al., 1999), region also stands out as a strong predictor of vote likelihood. Indeed, of the six sets of socio-demographic variables, it is the only one that proves statistically significant across the various logit models. Except for region of residence, educational level, and religion (i.e., whether a respondent is Catholic or not), socio-demographics do not appear to explain much of the vote for any particular party in those two elections.

3.1. Conditional effects of issue salience on issue ownership voting

The interpretation of the effect of the central variables of interest—issue salience and issue ownership—on vote choice is less straightforward. Because we posit that the influence of issue ownership is dependent upon the salience of the issue, we model this effect using interaction terms. When interpreting the results of regression models with interactive variables, we need to remember that the effect of one variable is conditional upon the level of another (Friedrich, 1982). This means that we cannot deduce the effects of the interacted

²² Consistent with the recommendations of Friedrich (1982), Braumoeller (2004) and Brambor et al. (2006), we separately include the voter programmatic preference measures on taxes and social programs in the estimations. In this case, the measures are perfectly (and negatively) correlated; support for tax cuts is equivalent to opposition to the maintenance of social programs. Thus, we only include one variable—preference for tax cuts—in the regressions.

²³ The inclusion of the variable Ownership in two separate interactive terms creates a “tacit interaction” between the Salience and Voter Preference variables. Following the recommendation of Braumoeller (2004) and Brambor et al. (2006), we therefore include a set of $S \times \text{Pref}$ terms in the estimations.

²⁴ Our results do not change if we include in our models leadership thermometer variables, a set of control variables often used in the literature on Canadian voting (e.g., Blais et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 1979, 1996, 2000; Nevitte et al., 2000); issue salience continues to condition the effect of issue ownership on vote choice. Consistent with the existing work, our analyses also reveal that having a positive image of the party leader has a statistically and substantively significant, positive effect on the likelihood of supporting that party. But, in light of the uneven and significant data restrictions that the inclusion of these leadership variables causes, we exclude them from the final models.

Table 2
Party vote in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections (logistic regression results)^a

	Liberal		PC		NDP		Reform		Bloc	
	<i>B</i>	(SE)								
Constant	−0.91*	(0.51)	−2.62***	(0.61)	−3.12***	(0.91)	0.80	(0.62)	−2.23*	(1.23)
2000 election	−0.08	(0.14)	0.15	(0.17)	0.54**	(0.22)	−0.61***	(0.20)	0.13	(0.26)
Age	−0.34	(0.44)	0.75	(0.53)	−1.13	(0.72)	−0.09	(0.60)	−1.19	(0.85)
Male	0.13	(0.13)	−0.00	(0.16)	−0.28	(0.19)	−0.08	(0.17)	0.29	(0.25)
Education	0.26	(0.34)	0.89**	(0.38)	−0.20	(0.55)	−0.96**	(0.45)	0.94	(0.64)
Income	0.27	(0.23)	0.21	(0.26)	−0.04	(0.31)	−0.22	(0.28)	−0.56	(0.38)
Catholic	0.23	(0.16)	−0.19	(0.19)	−0.11	(0.23)	−0.31	(0.20)	2.35***	(0.29)
Atlantic	−0.76***	(0.22)	1.11***	(0.22)	1.02***	(0.28)	−0.50	(0.31)	—	
Quebec	−0.88***	(0.20)	0.21	(0.23)	−0.51	(0.35)	−1.81***	(0.32)	—	
West	−0.63***	(0.16)	−0.29	(0.21)	0.30	(0.24)	0.50***	(0.18)	—	
Partisan identification	2.17***	(0.15)	2.05***	(0.20)	2.24***	(0.27)	4.33***	(0.64)	5.36***	(0.47)
Taxes: <i>S</i>	0.04	(0.10)	0.00	(0.12)	−0.46***	(0.17)	0.25*	(0.14)	−0.25	(0.20)
Social programs: <i>S</i>	0.04	(0.18)	0.25	(0.22)	0.37	(0.28)	−0.29	(0.21)	0.56	(0.38)
Jobs: <i>S</i>	0.17	(0.13)	0.19	(0.16)	−0.01	(0.23)	−0.30*	(0.16)	0.15	(0.52)
Crime: <i>S</i>	0.05	(0.12)	−0.34**	(0.14)	−0.19	(0.22)	0.28**	(0.14)	−0.65**	(0.27)
Taxes: <i>O</i>	0.30***	(0.10)	0.39***	(0.11)	0.36**	(0.15)	0.38***	(0.11)	0.79***	(0.29)
Voter Tx/SocPrgm Pref	0.02	(0.45)	0.29	(0.52)	1.41	(0.90)	−0.55	(0.64)	0.90	(1.06)
Taxes: <i>O</i> × Pref	0.04	(0.37)	0.30	(0.40)	−0.21	(0.55)	−1.24***	(0.46)	1.20	(0.96)
Social program: <i>O</i>	0.13	(0.15)	0.27	(0.19)	0.15	(0.26)	0.75**	(0.29)	0.82**	(0.36)
Social program: <i>O</i> × Pref	0.18	(0.26)	−0.36	(0.34)	0.67	(0.59)	−0.47	(0.43)	−0.28	(0.68)
Jobs: <i>O</i>	1.08***	(0.24)	0.25	(0.27)	0.41	(0.45)	0.49	(0.30)	0.13	(1.15)
Crime: <i>O</i>	0.12	(0.21)	0.27	(0.26)	0.25	(0.41)	0.24	(0.25)	0.85*	(0.47)
Taxes: <i>S</i> × Pref	−0.03	(0.23)	−0.25	(0.25)	0.31	(0.36)	0.27	(0.32)	−0.62	(0.50)
Social program: <i>S</i> × Pref	−0.09	(0.22)	−0.09	(0.27)	1.15***	(0.40)	−0.27	(0.28)	−0.57	(0.46)
Taxes: <i>S</i> × <i>O</i> × Pref	0.18	(0.22)	−0.24	(0.25)	0.37	(0.36)	0.84***	(0.28)	−0.66	(0.55)
Social programs: <i>S</i> × <i>O</i> × Pref	−0.01	(0.13)	0.31*	(0.18)	−0.18	(0.29)	0.12	(0.21)	−0.01	(0.31)
Jobs: <i>S</i> × <i>O</i>	−0.21	(0.13)	0.19	(0.16)	0.16	(0.24)	0.21	(0.18)	0.06	(0.59)
Crime: <i>S</i> × <i>O</i>	0.09	(0.12)	−0.06	(0.15)	−0.08	(0.23)	0.17	(0.15)	−0.12	(0.30)
Pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	0.38		0.29		0.41		0.54		0.65	
Log likelihood	−1069.03		−794.99		−518.95		−641.04		−297.12	
<i>N</i>	2572		2572		2572		2572		2572	

^a Entries are logit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, *** $p \leq 0.01$.

variables directly from the regression coefficients.²⁵ The coefficients for the issue salience (*S*) terms reported in Table 2 only capture the effect of the special case in which ownership of those issues is zero. In the case of the ownership (*O*) variables, their estimated effect on vote choice presented in Table 2 is limited to an even more restrictive set of circumstances; they measure the effect of ownership when the salience is equal to zero, but only for valence issues.

While these special cases do reveal some information, to assess the validity of our central hypothesis, we need to calculate the effect of issue ownership when

issue salience is equal to one and two. We present the results of these calculations in Table 3 along with the coefficients of the ownership variables for both valence and position issues when issue salience is equal to zero (taken from Table 2). It is clear from this table that the influence of party ownership on vote choice is conditioned by the salience of the issue in question. As shown in the top tier of Table 3, the effect of issue ownership on party vote is only statistically significant at $p \leq 0.10$ in five out of 20 cases when the issue in question is considered unimportant. On the other hand, when the issue is moderately salient (as shown in the second tier of the table), 14 of the 20 conditional ownership coefficients are statistically significant and of the expected positive sign. And when the issue is highly salient (bottom tier of the table), 16 out of 20 conditional ownership coefficients meet these criteria. Eleven of the 20 party-issue combinations support our further claim that issue

²⁵ The same holds true for the statistical significance of the variables' effects. As argued by Brambor et al. (2007: n6) and as will be shown in our analyses, the conditional effects of each variable on the dependent variable may be statistically significant even if the coefficient of the interactive term is found to be statistically insignificant.

Table 3

Conditional effects of variables on party vote in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections (as logistic coefficients based on the regressions in Table 2)

	Liberal		PC		NDP		Reform		Bloc	
	<i>B</i>	(SE)								
Ownership when issue salience = 0 (coeff. from Table 2)										
Taxes	0.34	(0.36)	0.69*	(0.39)	0.15	(0.53)	-0.85*	(0.45)	2.00**	(0.91)
Social programs	0.30	(0.21)	-0.09	(0.29)	0.82	(0.54)	0.28	(0.32)	0.53	(0.60)
Jobs	1.08***	(0.24)	0.25	(0.27)	0.41	(0.45)	0.49	(0.30)	0.13	(1.15)
Crime	0.12	(0.21)	0.27	(0.26)	0.25	(0.41)	0.24	(0.25)	0.85*	(0.47)
Ownership when issue salience = 1										
Taxes	0.52***	(0.19)	0.45**	(0.19)	0.52*	(0.30)	-0.01	(0.22)	1.34***	(0.45)
Social programs	0.30***	(0.11)	0.22	(0.14)	0.64**	(0.27)	0.40**	(0.17)	0.53	(0.36)
Jobs	0.86***	(0.12)	0.44***	(0.14)	0.57***	(0.22)	0.71***	(0.16)	0.20	(0.58)
Crime	0.21**	(0.11)	0.20	(0.14)	0.17	(0.21)	0.41***	(0.13)	0.73***	(0.25)
Ownership when issue salience = 2										
Taxes	0.70***	(0.20)	0.22	(0.22)	0.90**	(0.40)	0.83***	(0.23)	0.67*	(0.41)
Social programs	0.29***	(0.11)	0.53***	(0.15)	0.46***	(0.14)	0.53**	(0.22)	0.52*	(0.30)
Jobs	0.65***	(0.08)	0.62***	(0.11)	0.73***	(0.13)	0.92***	(0.14)	0.26	(0.25)
Crime	0.31***	(0.10)	0.14	(0.12)	0.09	(0.17)	0.58***	(0.12)	0.61**	(0.27)

* $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, *** $p \leq 0.01$.

ownership should have a *larger* substantive impact on vote probability when the issue is salient than when it is considered irrelevant or less salient. This positive relationship is evident when we compare conditional coefficients (when salience = 1) to unconditional coefficients, and when we compare conditional coefficients when salience is equal to 2 (highly salient) to those when salience is equal to 1 (moderately salient).²⁶

These findings therefore suggest the need to control for issue salience when modeling issue ownership effects on vote choice; studies that ignore this conditionality overlook key differences in how a party's ownership of an issue affects a voter's electoral decision. This conclusion is also confirmed by likelihood-ratio tests (King, 1989). The tests indicate that our conditional models of issue ownership are closer to the true specification of individual vote choice than the standard ownership models for all political parties; the improvement in model fit is statistically significant in all five regressions.²⁷

²⁶ Similar conclusions about the conditionality of issue ownership can be drawn when the analyses are conducted separately for each election year.

²⁷ The chi-square values from the likelihood-ratio tests are all statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$. Similarly, the Akaike information criterion (AIC) values of the conditional models are all smaller than the AIC values of the unconditional models. When vote choice is modeled separately for each election year, the fit of the conditional model is superior to that of the unconditional model in all party-election-year cases, except for the case of the Liberal Party in 2000, according to the likelihood-ratio test, and the cases of the Liberal Party in 2000 and the Bloc Québécois in 2000, according to comparisons of the AIC values.

While supportive of our claim of the conditional effect of ownership on salience and our subsequent model choice, these data do not show that issue ownership (conditional or unconditional) plays an equal role in voting decisions for *every* issue and *every* party. For example, evidence of the conditionality of issue ownership is slightly weaker for position issues than for valence ones. Five out of the nine cases in which the effect of ownership is greater when the issue is considered insignificant involve the position issues of taxes and social programs. As stated earlier, issue ownership theory is not necessarily designed to apply to those issues over which there is no consensus on goals. That is why, for the purpose of this analysis, we have tried to adapt these position issues into valence-style issues using the survey's policy preference measures.²⁸ But it is clear that additional research involving other election studies with broader sets of position issues is needed to ascertain the general comparability of valence and position issues for issue ownership voting.

Our results also highlight that not all parties' votes are equally shaped by the conditionality of issue ownership. While the focus of this analysis has been on the relationship between issue salience and

²⁸ Our main findings that the effects of issue ownership are conditional upon issue salience are robust, however, to an alternate specification of the model in which we treat all issues as valence issues; we do this by removing from the model the interactions between individual issue preference and ownership of the taxes and social programs issues as well as the issue preference and salience \times issue preference variables for taxes and social programs.

ownership, recent work (e.g., Aldrich and Griffin, 2003; Damore, 2004) suggests that the effect of issue ownership on vote choice is not immune to the dynamics of electoral campaigns and party rhetoric. The influence of these campaign factors may help explain why, as we saw in some cases, an increase in issue salience caused a monotonic decline in the effect of ownership on a party's vote. Consider the Liberal Party and the jobs issue. Having won the 1993 election on its strong reputation at job creation, the Liberal Party was severely criticized by the opposition parties during the 1997 and 2000 election campaigns for not having delivered on that issue (Nadeau et al., 2000). Based on the work of Conover (1981), Conover and Feldman (1989), and Krosnick (1990), we might expect voters who deemed the issue of job creation to be important to have been more receptive to those critiques. With the Liberals' ownership of the jobs issue in doubt, these "issue public" voters may have relied less on this reputational factor when deciding whether to support the party. Similarly, it has been argued that the NDP, despite its traditional ownership of the social program issue, did not try to capitalize on the Liberals' poor record at protecting social programs in the 1997 election (Nevitte et al., 2000: 103). Thus, voters who felt that the social programs issue was important may have been disappointed with the NDP's lack of effort to campaign on its issue reputation.

In both cases, the observed effects of these campaign dynamics are consistent with the estimated effects of the ownership variables for these issues and parties: the impact of the ownership variable on vote choice decreases with an increase in issue salience. While these explanations warrant further study, it seems that the traditional owners of the issues were being punished for failing to defend their issue reputations as "their" issues gained importance. It should be noted that these results do not undermine the general finding that issue ownership matters or the conclusion of this article that the effect of issue ownership is tempered by issue salience. They just suggest that the force of ownership is neither independent of the issue or party being examined, nor is it independent of campaign dynamics.

3.2. Predicted probabilities

The logistic regression coefficients in Table 3 give the reader an idea of the statistical significance and direction of ownership's effects on vote choice. But, to fully grasp the impact of these conditional variables

on a respondent's likelihood of voting for a particular party, we consider some typical voter scenarios. In Table 4, we list the predicted probabilities of a voter supporting the Liberal Party and the NDP on the basis of the taxes and jobs issues, respectively, under differing values of issue salience and ownership. For the calculations, the values of all other issue salience and ownership variables are assumed to be zero; all socio-demographic variables are held at their means; and the probabilities are calculated for an individual who is voting in the 1997 election and who is not a partisan of the party in question.²⁹ Because the first example involves a position issue, we make the further assumption in that case that the respondent supports tax cuts (voter tax preference = 1).

These examples clearly demonstrate the value added of issue salience for the effects of issue ownership on individual vote choice. If we start with the scenario typically modeled in ownership theory research—where ownership = 1, but salience = 0—we find that our respondent would support a tax-cut-owning Liberal Party with a 0.437 probability. However, once the taxes issue becomes salient ($S = 1$), that probability increases to 0.484. When the respondent finds taxes to be "very important" ($S = 2$), his probability of supporting the Liberal Party owner increases to 0.531.

Our operationalization of the ownership variable also allows us to test for the presence of a punishment mechanism. The Liberal vote choice hypothetical offers support for the hypothesis that salience has the opposite effect when the party in question does not own the issue. If another party is considered the owner of the taxes issue, the probability of voting for the Liberal Party starts lower and drops even further as the issue becomes salient. The same patterns appear in the hypothetical involving support for the NDP on the basis of the jobs issue.³⁰ As the latter example shows, even when the overall probability of voting for a party is small, that

²⁹ When these hypotheticals are modeled with a voter who was a partisan of the party in question, the absolute values of the predicted probabilities are higher in every case. However, we find that the patterns of probability change under varying levels of issue salience are identical to those displayed in Table 4.

³⁰ These patterns of probability change are representative of those found in hypotheticals involving every party and every issue. When modeled for vote choice in 1997, the probability of voting for the issue owner increases when the issue becomes salient (salience changing from 0 to 2) in 10 out of 20 cases. The probability of voting for a party that is not the issue owner decreases when the issue becomes salient in 15 out of 20 cases. The results are the same if the probabilities are calculated for vote choice in the 2000 election.

Table 4
Probability of voter support under varying issue salience and ownership conditions

	Issue not salient (salience=0)	Issue salient		Change in vote probability (from salience = 0 to salience = 2)
		Salience = 1	Salience = 2	
a. Effects of the taxes issue on probability to vote for the Liberal Party ^a				
Liberal Party owner (ownership = +1)	0.437	0.484	0.531	+0.094
Liberal Party not owner (ownership = -1)	0.281	0.249	0.219	-0.062
b. Effects of the jobs issue on probability to vote for the New Democratic Party (NDP) ^b				
NDP owner (ownership = +1)	0.026	0.030	0.034	+0.008
NDP not owner (ownership = -1)	0.011	0.010	0.008	-0.003

^a Probabilities of voting for that party in the 1997 election calculated for a 45 year old, non-Catholic male who has completed high school, has an income of \$CDN 60,000–69,000, is not a partisan of the party in question, resides in the province of Ontario, and supports the cutting of taxes.

^b Probabilities of voting for that party in the 1997 election calculated for a 45 year old, non-Catholic male who has completed high school, has an income of \$CDN 60,000–69,000, is not a partisan of the party in question, and resides in the province of Ontario.

probability changes markedly—either increasing when the party is the issue owner or decreasing when another party is—when the issue in question becomes salient.

3.2.1. Regional variation

The central goal of these analyses has been to explore the relationship between issue ownership, issue salience, and vote choice. But in demonstrating the conditionality of issue ownership on issue salience, the regression results have further reinforced the centrality of Canadian geography in voting behavior. As discussed earlier, regions emerge as significant determinants of vote likelihood for all political parties in these two elections. It is therefore worthwhile to explore how much of an effect a change in region has on a respondent's party choice. Looking back to the hypotheticals presented in Table 4, how would the likelihood of voting for the New Democratic Party change if the respondent was residing in the Atlantic provinces—an area of increased NDP support in the late 1990s when its then-leader was from that region—as opposed to the reserve category of Ontario? And, how would the probability of voting

for the Liberals vary outside of its traditional stronghold of Ontario?

Table 5 displays the probabilities of voting for an issue owner by region. In the first two columns, we repeat the values reported in Table 4 for ballots cast in Ontario, the reserve regional category. Looking across the columns, we find that the likelihood of supporting a party when it is perceived to be the issue owner is higher in its stronghold regions and lower in areas where it is traditionally weaker. And this pattern is maintained regardless of whether or not the issue is salient. As we would expect, we find increased vote probability for the NDP in the Atlantic provinces, relative to other regions. In Quebec, where the NDP has failed repeatedly to gain a foothold, a vote for the NDP is less likely. The probability of supporting the Liberal Party is highest in Ontario and is lowest in Quebec where it faces strong competition from the Bloc Québécois.

That said, these regional differences do not eclipse the conditioning effect of issue salience on issue ownership. In every region, a voter's probability of voting for

Table 5
Predicted probability of voting for party by region^a

	Ontario (reserve category) reported in Table 4		Quebec		Atlantic		West	
	Issue not salient	Issue salient (<i>S</i> = 2)	Issue not salient	Issue salient (<i>S</i> = 2)	Issue not salient	Issue salient (<i>S</i> = 2)	Issue not salient	Issue salient (<i>S</i> = 2)
Liberal Party: owner of the taxes issue	0.437	0.531	0.244	0.321	0.266	0.346	0.292	0.376
NDP: owner of jobs issue	0.026	0.034	0.016	0.021	0.068	0.089	0.034	0.046

^a Probabilities of voting for that party in the 1997 election calculated for a 45 year old, non-Catholic male who has completed high school, has an income of \$CDN 60,000–69,000, and is not a partisan of the party in question. In the first hypothetical, the respondent also supports the cutting of taxes.

the Liberals or the NDP increases as the issue becomes salient. Thus, while region matters, salience still conditions ownership-based vote choice.

4. Conclusion

Work done on voting since the 1970s has suggested that sociological factors are not the only or the central determinants of vote choice (e.g., Nie et al., 1976; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). Our article continues in this tradition. Drawing upon individual-level survey data from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies, we find evidence that party reputation influences an individual's voting behavior. A voter is generally more likely to support a political party if that party is perceived to be the most competent on a given issue.

But the micro-level relationship between issue competence and party choice is not as simple as that commonly articulated and tested by the issue ownership voting literature. Rather, our analysis demonstrates that the influence of issue ownership on vote choice is conditional upon the perceived salience of the issue. A party's issue competence will affect a voter's behavior *only* if the issue in question is considered salient. The role of issue salience, so prominent in analyses of issue-ownership-based *candidate* behavior and in Budge and Farlie's (1983) aggregate-level examination of issue ownership effects on election outcomes, therefore needs to be more explicitly integrated into the current formulation and testing of the ownership theory of voting.

Our findings have both empirical and practical implications. First, the fact that the conditional model is closer to the true specification of vote choice calls into question the conclusions reached by scholars who fail to directly measure the role of issue salience in issue ownership models of voter behavior. When combined with the fact that some studies also fail to compensate for the positional nature of some issues (see, for example, Nadeau et al., 2001), it is clear that the validity and generalizability of these earlier conclusions must be reassessed in light of this study's findings.

Second, recognition of the centrality of issue salience has practical implications for the behavior of vote-seeking political parties. While past work on issue ownership may have suggested that party reputation, as distinct from party issue positions, is critical for vote choice, we demonstrate that reputation alone is insufficient. Parties need to be more concerned about conveying the significance of "their" issues to the public. The importance of this conclusion is further strengthened by the findings that voters rarely share the same issue priorities as each other or as political parties in the system (Duch et al., 2000; Fournier

et al., 2003; Petrocik et al., 2003; Rivers, 1988). Our research suggests that this heterogeneity of perceived issue importance has real effects that not only alter the significance of issue ownership but may determine the outcome of any given election.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2008.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2008.01.001).

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