

1 Introduction

Political science has given considerable attention to the spatial competition that occurs between parties on matters of policy. But as Donald Stokes observed in 1963, political evaluations and voting decisions are not just about policy distances and disagreements. They often turn on management, delivery, trust, good government: on competence. Indeed, elections are always partly about these things, and sometimes fundamentally about them. Competence is a necessary condition of electability.

‘Governments can’t afford to mess with competence. Once they are seen as incapable of running the country, the game is up. The political argument stops being about direction of travel, and centres on whether the government can even start the engine.’¹

No self-respecting politician will waste an opportunity to attack the competence and trustworthiness of his or her opponent. No party will fail to claim credit for its performance in office, and no government will fail to avoid – or try to avoid – embarrassment and blame. Parties develop reputations for trust on certain policy issues and they develop associations with certain issues. There are consequences that arise from those associations – or from ‘issue ownership’ (Petrocik 1996): parties are expected to benefit electorally when issues on which they are considered most competent are also important to electoral choice. This leads to expectations of ownership-based framing and priming strategies in campaigns. These aspects of politics are well known and widely researched. What is far less well understood and researched is the public opinion side to the politics of competence. Understanding the politics of competence requires a focus on mass publics, as well as on political elites. This book responds to that gap.

In the study of competence, the concepts, measures, theories and evidence for public opinion about policy competence are less advanced and integrated than in the study of spatial voting and party competition.

¹ Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian* newspaper, 1 April 2012.

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The competence literature uses concepts of issue ownership, valence, performance, economic voting and partisanship as a running tally of performance. These are often contested and loosely defined and they are commonly only analysed in isolation. This has resulted in a mismatch of evidence and a myriad of different definitions of what does – and what does not – constitute evaluations of competence, and how and why these matter. This book clarifies and integrates concepts about policy competence in public opinion.

We propose that public opinion about competence is characterised by three main concepts:

- (i) Issue ownership – defined as the representation by parties of different issue-publics and constituencies and a positive handling reputation, measured as the relative advantages a party has across the issue agenda;
- (ii) Issue performance – defined as the degree to which a policy is going well or going badly for the party in office, measured as the change in evaluations of party handling of a given policy or perceptions of whether a policy area is going well or badly;
- (iii) Generalised competence – defined as the degree to which parties are trusted or otherwise across the policy agenda, measured as the latent factor in public opinion about party competence.

Each of these concepts has an application in individual-level and aggregate-level analyse. We focus on both levels in this book.

Our concepts are not exhaustive, but they have construct validity and clear causes and consequences. The book proceeds to test the implications of our three concepts. By so doing, it addresses some of the major theoretical and empirical puzzles in the literature about issue competence. We reveal how greater clarity in theory, concepts and measurement offers new insights into some of the important questions about competence in political science. These questions include: how frequent are major changes in party strengths and weaknesses on issues, and what explains these changes? Are parties rewarded and punished for their performance on issues, and to what degree does this occur for governments and oppositions? Why do governments tend to lose support over the period their party is in power, and in such a predictable way? What is the contribution of a competence-based explanation to voting? When and under what conditions does competence matter for party support? This book offers answers to these questions, and more.

We analyse the three concepts alongside the concept of partisanship. By so doing we resolve some of the puzzles about competence and partisanship to understand when these concepts overlap and when they are distinct. This gives us a better understanding of public opinion about

competence on issues, and also a better understanding of partisanship and its characteristics and consequences.

This book is about public opinion regarding competence on *issues*. This aspect of public opinion is distinct to public opinion about leader strengths and weaknesses, to the concept of partisanship (as a political identity), and complementary to economic evaluations. We purposefully extend the range of policy domains on which public opinion dynamics are theorised and about which implications are understood.

Competence is not perfectly distinct to position, neither in conceptual nor empirical terms. When we talk of competence we assume there is a positional aspect to competence. A voter shouldn't trust a party if they disagree with the party on an issue. We take these overlapping concepts into account in our conceptualisation and analysis.

The book's contributions are made possible by amassing thousands of survey items on public opinion about issue competence and handling in five countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany). These data cover up to seven decades in aggregate-level public opinion about party competence on issues and span multiple issue topics in each country. Specifically, we collated responses to 11,004 survey questions about party handling of multiple policy issues going back to the 1940s. These data are a unique resource which makes possible a range of new insights into public opinion. We combine findings from these aggregate data with insights from individual-level data. To our quantitative analysis we also add in-depth qualitative comparative analysis of cases. The result is, to the best of our knowledge, the most comprehensive coverage of issues, time and countries for which data are available.

The State of the Literature

We highlight here the main tensions and important puzzles in existing research about competence in public opinion, party competition and vote choices.

Confusion about Issue Ownership

The concept of 'issue ownership' relates to party reputations on specific policy issues (Petrocik 1996), but in reality we lack a really clear idea of what 'ownership' actually constitutes and how it should be measured. The public tends to rate parties as better on some issues relative to other issues, with some degree of predictability and stability over time, but the degree of stability is questionable. Parties are expected to be more

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successful in elections when their owned issues are also important – or ‘salient’ – to voters. All things being equal, parties seek to prime or frame election choices to be about issues they own (Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983). As argued by Walgrave et al. (2015), however, issue ownership is a multidimensional concept; it is more complex than often assumed.

Petrocik combined two concepts in his theory of issue ownership: the concept of long-term party-constituency issue ownership and the concept of short-term issue ownership lease. The former relates to representation and commitment to issues and issue publics over the long term. It clearly has a spatial dimension as well as a commitment dimension, although the spatial element is absent in Petrocik’s definition. The latter (short-term ownership lease) relates to performance. The two concepts can be differentiated by their assumed stability (long-term ownership) versus their potential for change (short-term lease). Petrocik (1996: 827) said, ‘Party constituency ownership of an issue is much more long-term (although it can change and occasionally exhibits fluctuation) because its foundation is (1) the relatively stable, but different social bases, that distinguish party constituencies in modern party systems and (2) the link between political conflict and social structure.’ By contrast, ‘short-term’ ownership is a positive competence or handling ‘lease’: ‘The record of the incumbent creates a handling advantage when one party can be blamed for current difficulties . . . wars, failed international or domestic policies, unemployment and inflation, or official corruption can happen at any time and provide one party with a “lease” – short-term ownership – of a performance issue’ (Petrocik 1996: 827).

In this book we argue that the former concept of party-constituency ownership should be called ‘ownership’, whereas the latter concept points to a distinct characteristic of public opinion, namely short-term changes in party ratings on issues. One is issue ownership (though questions still remain concerning how to measure issue ownership and what its characteristics are), the other might be a source of a change in issue ownership and may also occur alongside stability in issue ownership. That is to say, parties have reputational strengths and weaknesses on issues (ownership) but there is also important over-time variation in public opinion about party competence within a party’s relative issue strengths. Sometimes, those short-term changes may alter issue ownership but these instances should be relatively rare. Separating these longer term and shorter term properties of public opinion offers a clearer way to study causation and effects. It also helps to solve the following difficulties in the ownership literature that arise from the conflation of long- and short-term ‘issue ownership’.

The first difficulty in the issue ownership literature is the debate about whether ownership is stable or volatile. Petrocik described the changing issue agenda as the point of between-election variation, but issue-handling reputations and the voters' bias towards the party advantaged by issues as 'critical constants'. Separating ownership from short-term performance enables us to examine the degree to which ownership – measured in a way consistent with a relative issue reputation – is indeed a constant. Our analyses in Chapter 4 reveal that this is far from true, with fascinating implications for explanation and effects. We also gain insights into the fundamental characteristics of public opinion about competence with respect to persistence and fluctuation. Issue ownership is, by definition, an evaluation structured in time, more enduring than transitory. The short-term nature of performance evaluations, however, is more transitory, returning more rapidly to an equilibrium state.

The second but related difficulty concerns operational definitions and measurement of issue ownership. Using average ratings of parties on issues, for example, combines a definition of long-term ownership and short-term performance. It ignores the contrasting time series dynamics of stability and change. Using the lead of one party over another on an issue inflates partisan bias in competence evaluations; partisans will tend to rate their party higher, and other parties lower, meaning that it is not always possible to disentangle a party's issue ownership from its popularity overall. Separating these concepts allows for empirical precision and the analysis of distinct empirical dynamics and consequences. One party's ownership loss does not have to be another party's ownership gain. This is only possible to detect using a measure of ownership that compares issue ratings within parties rather than between parties. It gives us novel, intuitive and important insights into public opinion about party reputations on issues. We outline the concepts and their measurement in detail in Chapter 2, and we reveal their different properties and characteristics in Chapter 3.

The third difficulty relates to whether ownership is fundamentally a concept about competence and handling or whether it is about spatial competition and proximity, representation and association (Stubager and Slothuus 2013; Walgrave et al. 2015, 2016). The notion of issue ownership has combined various aspects of a party's reputation and the representation of policy positions and constituencies. Separating 'ownership' from performance allows us to explicitly recognise the representational and associational aspect of ownership and a competence and policy handling aspect of performance, although acknowledging that the two cannot be separated entirely. This book responds by analysing the degree to which ownership change results from both positional and competence

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aspects of politics and by seeking to parse out issue position effects from issue competence.

Debates about Endogeneity

One of the famous debates in political behaviour has been between those who argue that partisanship is a measure of performance, representing a running tally of performance assessments (Fiorina 1981; MacKuen et al. 1989; Clarke et al. 2004, 2009; Whiteley et al. 2013), and those who argue that partisanship is the lens through which competence (and other) assessments are formed (Campbell et al. 1960; Gerber and Green 1998; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2004). Given how important partisanship is to politics, and to the implications of a perceptual screen and a selection mechanism which filters out opposing voices, this debate continues to have central importance. At its extremes, partisanship becomes either a competence measure (see Whiteley et al. 2005; Clarke et al. 2004, 2006, 2009; Sanders et al. 2011) or at the other end of the debate competence assessments have little or no independent influence on the outcome of vote choices (see the debate between Evans and Chzhen 2016, and Whiteley et al. 2016, and a helpful response by Wlezien 2016a). The implications have been examined quite widely in relation to economic voting and recently applied to a broader concept of ‘valence’, or competence (Wlezien et al. 1997; Green et al. 1998; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Evans and Chzhen 2016). We respond to the question of endogeneity in public opinion about competence in three ways.

The first is to argue for clearer concepts in public opinion about competence and to analyse their behaviour alongside measures of partisanship. The distinctions we bring to the concept of competence allow for assessment of when and how partisanship interacts with each one. We analyse relative party strengths and weaknesses on issues among partisans, rival partisans and independents, showing that these issue strengths and weaknesses cut through partisan biases, whereas overall level differences reveal expected partisan divides. Using a measure of ownership as a relative strength of a party across issues therefore eliminates the bias towards a party in terms of the level of its ratings on competence, and the bias in its lead in ratings over other parties (see also Stubager and Slothuus 2013), and enables us to show how even rival partisans rank a party’s relative strengths and weaknesses in the same order as partisans. We also analyse our concepts of performance and generalised competence alongside party identification. There is substantial performance updating among partisans but less long-term updating of party ratings

among non-partisans. Our concept of generalised competence has prior temporal ordering to partisanship, much more than the other way around.

The second way we respond to the question of endogeneity is by creating new over-time measures of public ratings of parties on competence. The competence literature has suffered from the absence of continuous measures of public opinion about party handling and performance. It has meant that measures of partisanship have been used as a proxy for performance updating, and the same measures have been used as a measure of a partisan lens. The distinction then comes down to the properties and characteristics, causes and consequences of this same measure. We amassed thousands of survey items across time and across countries. Using these data we analyse the interrelationship between public opinion about competence and measures of party identification. We find evidence consistent with an exogenous impact of competence on partisanship (a running tally), although not only in this causal direction.

The third way is to control for the degree to which competence effects are influenced by partisanship in our models, allowing for the endogeneity in party competence evaluations and taking a conservative approach to the estimation of competence effects. We also take into consideration, wherever possible, the contribution of survey question wording to the particular problem of endogeneity. Survey measures provide imperfect instruments to assess perceptions of competence. They can conflate competence and position, such as the question ‘which party is *best* on issue x’ (see Therriault 2015). They can also easily prime survey respondents to heavily draw on their partisan biases and affiliations in their answers ‘how well has party x handled issue y’/‘how well would party x handle issue y’. For this reason we use a variety of different measures.

Valence and Competence: Valence as a Fuzzy Empirical Concept

Stokes (1963, 1992) famously distinguished between position issues and valence issues, defining position issues as ‘those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined’ (Stokes 1963: 373) and valence issues as ‘those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate’ (Stokes 1963: 373). Since Stokes, the concept of ‘valence’ has been used widely in political science and increasingly so. Yet the term ‘valence’ has become rather nebulous – such that we argue that it should be used and applied very cautiously. We differentiate the term ‘valence’ from a narrower concept of ‘issue competence’, but our book applies directly to analyses of ‘valence’ and how we should theorize about them.

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Stokes' argument was a response to the spatial model of Downs (1954). Stokes (1963: 374) argued that not all political evaluations are over an 'ordered set of alternatives' needed for the spatial model to work. Sometimes the more important electoral evaluation is about competence, or valence. According to Stokes, among the symbolic components of valence, success or failure are most important, and 'valences' are learnt by the electorate 'from its experiences with the parties and the leaders, and the results they achieve, over time' (Stokes 1992: 150). 'Parties may be unequally linked in the public's mind with the universally approved conditions of good times, and the universally disapproved conditions of bad times' (Stokes 1992: 144). If the condition has passed, the evaluation focuses on credit or blame for past performance. If the condition is a future or current state, the 'argument turns on which party, given possession of the government, is the more likely to bring it about' (Stokes 1963: 373).

There are four common mistakes in uses of the term 'valence issues' in empirical political science if we take a close and careful reading of the argument put forward by Stokes (we discuss problems in formal theoretical uses later). These arise from researchers treating issues as falling into discrete categories as either valence or positional, as if those categories are permanent and exclusive. Simply labelling an issue 'a valence issue' is invariably the wrong thing to do.

When Stokes defined a valence issue, he highlighted how issues *become* about competence when the politics of the time makes them so. Issues are only valence issues when the terms of political debate and public evaluations become about management, trust, delivery and competence.

The first mistake is therefore to label issues as valence issues or position issues without recognition that the same issue could be more valence- or position-oriented over time. Issues can be transformed from valence to position issues if parties take opposing positions on any end goal. Position issues can be transformed into valence issues if the relevant evaluation concerns which party can deliver. The key for Stokes is whether the electorate is making a decision on the basis of valence or on the basis of position, depending on how the particular issue becomes contentious – in either valence or position terms – in mainstream political debate.

The second mistake is to ignore the possibility that the relevant measure could be more valence- or position-oriented depending on how a question about the same issue is asked, whether about ends (valence) or means (position) (see Fiorina 1981). Stone and Simas (2010: 372) touch on the distinction between ends and means, where they say: 'political outcomes often turn on which party is associated with valued outcomes such as virtue in government, peace, and low

unemployment. It is true that position issues relate to how best to achieve these valued outcomes, but election outcomes are sometimes more dependent on which party is associated with such outcomes (or blamed for their opposites) than on which party is closer to the electorate on how best to achieve them.' The same issue can be asked about in a valence way ('have healthcare services got better or got worse?') or in a positional way ('should there be more or less privatisation of healthcare services?'). This has implications for survey questions that seek to measure public opinion about issues.

The third mistake is to assume that an issue (and a measure) cannot include both valence and positional components. As argued by Egan (2008: 3), 'it is sensible that on valence issues, voters evaluate candidates with regard to both position (that is, the solution they propose to a particular public policy problem) and valence (the likelihood that they and their party will enact the solution should they be elected)'. Even an issue like the economy cannot be viewed in a discrete category of valence (Sanders and Gavin 2004; Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2011). Voters will evaluate a government on its economic approach from an ideological perspective, and also its success or failure. And a party's position on an issue may be inextricably linked with its valence. As argued by Ansolabehere and Snyder (2000: 333), 'the issue positions that parties or candidates take depend on their relative advantages on the valence issue.' And as Stokes (1963: 373) said, position issues 'lurk behind' many valence issues.

The final mistake is to ignore conditions and to focus only on valence *issues*. 'Valence issues' may denote good times and bad times, or good economic times and hard times, war, national prestige abroad, low levels of crime, economic growth, and success or failure in government (Stokes 1963, 1992). As Clark (2009; see also Clark 2014) highlighted, for Stokes, valence issues include both policy characteristics (such as economic prosperity) and non-policy characteristics (the absence of corruption). These combinations have continued in definitions of valence issues, including, for example, the ability to deliver on policy, commitment and/or managerial competence on an issue, a nation safe from external enemies, a clean environment, a well-educated citizenry (Egan 2007), peace, prosperity or virtue in government (Stone and Simas 2010), prosperity, scandal-free administration and the absence of inflation (MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1998). Valence issues can be policy-based and non-policy-based depending on the issue, goal or end in question. While we focus on issue competence in this book, we also analyse the impact of events, shocks and conditions which make vote choices more dependent on evaluations of competence. We reveal the importance of a generalised

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notion of competence, inspired by Stokes, in addition to specific issue competence and also the notion of issue ownership.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are some issues that are so dominantly about position that they might deserve a category of their own: they are attitudes which indicate long-standing ideological *values* and orientations. Egan (2007: 2–3) states that, ‘Pure position issues are those on which citizens disagree over desired outcomes: should abortion be legal? Should gun ownership be restricted?’ Preferences over abortion, as well as gay rights, women’s rights, censorship in the media and in schools, and euthanasia represent issues on which preferences relate to concepts of right and wrong in ways of living. While these are political issues, a person’s beliefs also relate to underpinning value orientations in liberal authoritarian or small ‘c’ conservative terms. The valence element of these ‘issues’ or ‘values’ may be less important, but not necessarily absent altogether.

Valence as Everything and Nothing

There is an additional problem with how the term ‘valence’ is treated in the formal theoretical literature. The term ‘valence’ has been used as a catch-all term for almost any positive asset of a candidate or party that isn’t a spatial term in a formal theoretic model. It highlights the risks to empirical political science of using the term ‘valence’ too loosely. To demonstrate some of these difficulties,² we offer a list of studies applying the term ‘valence’.

We have seen authors defining valence as a valence dimension or a party valence score (MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1998; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Groseclose 2001), a candidate’s character or strategic advantage (Stone and Simas 2010; Adams et al. 2011), a leader advantage or disadvantage (Schofield 2004), the ability to manage a strong economy (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000), a strategic advantage (Bruter et al. 2010), candidate quality (Schofield 2004), candidate experience, reputation (Fenno 1978; also see Burden 2004), education and income or the lack thereof (Galasso and Nannicini 2011), party activism or the level of activist support (Schofield 2004), candidate spending (Zakharov 2009; Serra 2010), and the reputation of candidates, scandals and corruption (or their absence) in political parties and corruption at the level of candidates (Hollard and Rossignol 2008). To this list we can add incumbency (Zakharov 2009), the degree of uncertainty associated with candidates’ locations on positional issues (e.g.

² See also Green and Jennings (2017b).