

## Partisan Priorities

Americans consistently name Republicans as the party better at handling issues such as national security and crime, while they trust Democrats on issues such as education and the environment – a phenomenon called “issue ownership.” *Partisan Priorities* investigates the origins of issue ownership, showing that in fact the parties deliver neither superior performance nor popular policies on the issues they “own.” Rather, Patrick J. Egan finds that Republicans and Democrats simply prioritize their owned issues with lawmaking and government spending when they are in power. Because the parties tend to be particularly ideologically rigid on the issues they own, politicians actually tend to ignore citizens’ preferences when crafting policy on these issues. Thus, issue ownership distorts the relationship between citizens’ preferences and public policies.

Patrick J. Egan is Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Policy at New York University. He is coeditor of *Public Opinion and Constitutional Controversy* (with Nathaniel Persily and Jack Citrin, 2008). *Partisan Priorities* is based on his dissertation, which won the Carl Albert Award for best dissertation in legislative studies from the Legislative Studies Section of the American Political Science Association. In 2012, Professor Egan won the NYU Golden Dozen Award in recognition of his outstanding contribution to learning in the classroom. Before entering academia, he served as an Assistant Deputy Mayor of Policy and Planning in the office of Philadelphia Mayor Edward Rendell.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment

978-1-107-04258-2 — Partisan Priorities

How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics

Patrick J. Egan

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

## Partisan Priorities

*How Issue Ownership Drives and  
Distorts American Politics*

PATRICK J. EGAN

*New York University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-1-107-04258-2 — Partisan Priorities  
 How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics  
 Patrick J. Egan  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107042582](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107042582)

© Patrick J. Egan 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2013

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data*

Egan, Patrick J.

Partisan priorities : how issue ownership drives and distorts American politics / Patrick J. Egan.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-04258-2 (hardback)

1. Political parties – United States – Platforms. 2. United States – Politics and government – 21st century. I. Title.

JK2255.E44 2013

320.97309'05-dc23 2013009958

ISBN 978-1-107-04258-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-61727-8 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment

978-1-107-04258-2 — Partisan Priorities

How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics

Patrick J. Egan

Frontmatter

[More Information](#)

---

*In memory of my aunt Mary C. Hackett (1925–2011),  
the first woman to hold a cabinet-level position in the  
Rhode Island state government – and a steadfast partisan  
with inspiring priorities.*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 Introduction	1
2 Consensus Issues: Amid Polarization, Shared Goals	16
3 The Meaning and Measure of Issue Ownership	49
4 Ruling Out the Policy and Performance Hypotheses	79
5 Partisan Priorities: The Source of Issue Ownership	125
6 How Issue Ownership Distorts American Politics	172
7 Conclusion	212
<i>References</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	247

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to those who helped me bring this book to its conclusion and to those who accompanied me on the journey. *Partisan Priorities* began as my dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley – a very fruitful, collegial, and enjoyable place to earn a PhD in political science. I first and foremost thank Henry Brady, who not only chaired my dissertation but at several critical junctures provided me with the encouragement and opportunities to obtain the skills I needed to make this project what it is. Throughout, Henry was an ideal mentor: at once critical and caring, holding me to high standards with kindness and concern. A student could simply not ask for more from an advisor, and I can only hope that I am making similar contributions to the intellectual lives of those whom I teach.

I next thank Bruce Cain and Laura Stoker, each of whom played important roles in this project and in my development as a scholar. Laura was the first to bring the notion of issue ownership to my attention during a series of weekly dissertation meetings we held together. So much of what I know about statistics and research design rests upon an intellectual foundation built by Laura – in classes that I first completed as a student and, later, that I taught as her assistant. For his part, Bruce took me under his wing early on at Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS). He advised me throughout this project and in particular helped me think about how to make these ideas relevant to a wider audience. Additional Berkeley faculty who contributed to this project in ways large and small included Rui de

Figueiredo, John Ellwood, Bob Powell, Jas Sekhon, Merrill Shanks, Rob Van Houweling, and Margaret Weir. Jack Citrin belongs on the preceding list, but deserves special mention as a mentor, *macher*, and coconspirator.

After Berkeley, other institutions and people helped bring this book to completion. I acknowledge the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School, where I worked on this project as a visiting scholar. There, I received thorough and generous advice on this work from Chris Achen, Larry Bartels, Ted Carmines, Marty Gilens, Dan Gingerich, Karen Long Jusko, Adam Meirowitz, Tali Mendelberg, Tasha Philpot, Bob Putnam, and Jessica Trounstein – and was cheered on by Michele Epstein. This book has benefited tremendously from the support – intellectual, logistical, and collegial – I have received from each and every one of my fellow faculty members in New York University's Politics Department. For comments and conversations about this project in particular I thank Neal Beck, Jon Eguia, Sandy Gordon, Mik Laver, Larry Mead, Becky Morton, Jonathan Nagler, David Stasavage, and Josh Tucker. Financial resources from the Politics Department and from NYU's Goddard Junior Faculty Fellowship made it possible to complete this book.

It is appropriate that a book focusing so much on government spending properly acknowledge the public funding that indirectly made it possible. The ways in which this book brings empirical work and formal models together reflect an approach in political science known as Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models (EITM). I am appreciative of the training I received from the National Science Foundation-funded EITM Initiative and grateful to the political scientists who dreamed up and spearheaded this program. I also owe a great debt to the archives of opinion surveys – many maintained in one way or another with the help of government dollars – that serve as incomparably valuable, publicly available resources on over-time trends in Americans' attitudes on politics and public affairs. These include the American National Election Studies, the National Annenberg Election Survey, the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center, surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, and the collections of the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives at the University of Connecticut.

I am appreciative of the feedback I have received on this book from many other individuals and audiences over the years, including seminars

## *Acknowledgments*

xi

at George Washington, the Harris School, Harvard, MIT, Michigan, Minnesota, Stanford, Temple, and Vanderbilt. Conversations with Jamie Druckman, Stephen Jesse, Rick Valelly, and Chris Wlezien were particularly valuable as this project entered its final phases. I also thank the anonymous reviewers – those identified by both Cambridge and another press – for extensive, thoughtful comments on the manuscript that made this book considerably better. My editor Robert Dreesen and the production teams at Cambridge and Newgen Knowledge Works have been fantastic partners in the Herculean effort of getting this book into print.

Since we first met when I was a master's student at the Woodrow Wilson School more than fifteen years ago, Doug Arnold has been a trusted mentor who I am now honored to call my friend. Doug's insight and encouragement – and the detailed comments he provided after reading the entire manuscript – were critical to bringing this project to its fruition. Mentors of every stripe, past and present, have left their indelible marks on me; their legacies may be found within these pages. They include Joy Charlton, Donna Cooper, Nan Feyler, Walt Odets, Eric Rofes, Ken Sherrill, and Lisa Shulock.

My extended family – my parents, brothers and sister, in-laws, nieces and nephews – have supported me with their love and enthusiasm, and have even suffered occasional conversations about the ideas presented here. Fantastic, dedicated friends – especially Chris Bartlett, all the Edens, Ronda Goldfein and David Lee Preston, Bill Heinzen, Kimee Kimura, Valerie Koscelnik, Megan Mullin, Abe Newman, Fred Wherry, and Tom Wilson Weinberg – have walked with me on this journey and made it enjoyable. Finally, I thank my partner Ken Harmon for his unconditional love for me, his indefatigable faith in me, and the joy he has shared with me at every stage of this book's progress – and now, happily, its completion.