

**Position, Competence, and Commitment. Three Dimensions of Issue Voting.**

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**Abstract**

We investigate the impact of three issue-related party perceptions on people's vote choices.

The positional dimension of issue voting holds that voters are more likely to prefer parties whose policy positions on issues come close to their own policy preferences. The competence dimension of issue voting implies that voters are more inclined to cast their ballot for parties that they see as more competent to tackle policy issues. The commitment dimension means that voters are more likely to prefer parties that they perceive as more committed to specific issues. Leveraging data from Belgium's two largest regions (Flanders and Wallonia), we find that all dimensions exert an effect on electoral choice: position has the strongest effect, followed by competence and commitment.

Keywords: issue voting, Belgium, spatial voting, issue ownership, issue salience.

Issue voting means that voters cast their ballot based on political issues. It is supposed to be on the rise in the U.S. (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1999; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006) and also in Europe (Aardal and van Wijnen 2005; but see: Green and Hobolt 2008). While the literature on issue voting is substantial, remarkably few studies have examined the *multiple* ways in which issues are connected to parties (or candidates) in voters' minds. The dominant approach is the spatial framework of voting behavior based on Downs's (1957) model of electoral competition. The idea is simple: voters cast their ballot for the party (or candidate) that they perceive to hold a *position* that is closest to their own policy preferences. A second aspect of issue voting can be labelled as the *competence* dimension of issue voting. Here the idea is not so much that people vote for parties with whom they agree positionally but rather that some parties are considered more competent to handle and 'solve' specific policy issues. Issue voting, in this line of work, consists of voting for the party that one considers as most competent to tackle issues (problems). Third, and gaining some traction in the literature recently, apart from being perceived as positionally close and competent, parties can be perceived as being especially *committed* to deal with an issue. Committed parties are supposed to consider the issue a priority for political action. Concerned voters prefer parties that will commit to act on their pet issues.

Hence, following recent work by van der Brug (2017), we argue that at least three different versions of issue voting exist— positional, competence and commitment variants. However, the works addressing these three types of issue voting are disconnected. Coming from different, even opposed, schools of thought, these theories simply co-exist without much confrontation. Only a few studies combine two perspectives, and studies accounting for all three perspectives are almost nonexistent.

Drawing on the case of Belgium and using its most recent national election study (2014) containing novel measures of the three dimensions with regard to several policy issues, this

study has one straightforward aim: examining the effect of the three dimensions of issue-party perceptions on people's voting behavior.

### **Three Dimensions of Issue Voting**

Voters' issue perceptions can affect their electoral choice in at least three ways. To start with, regarding voters' perceptions of parties' issue *positions*, the classic spatial school of voting behavior forms certainly the most influential account of how issue considerations affect people's vote for a party (or a candidate<sup>1</sup>). Basically, two different types of spatial models have emerged: proximity models suppose that voters care about how close parties' positions are to their own (e.g. Enelow & Hinich, 1984), while directional models stipulate that voters primarily care about whether parties stay on the same side of an issue as they are (e.g. Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Although many debates within the spatial school are unsolved, the sheer fact that positional considerations with regard to issues affect the vote has received strong empirical support (see for example: Merrill & Grofman, 1999).

Starting in the 1980s but quickly gaining ground in the last decade, an alternative account of issue voting holds that people vote for the party that they consider to be most *competent* to tackle an issue (problem). This work was triggered by Stokes' (1963) work on valence issues and later developed into a cottage industry around the concept of 'issue ownership' or 'issue competence' (Budge & Farlie, 1983a; Petrocik, 1996). While initially solely targeting valence issues—issues on which both voters and parties agree on the policy goals—the idea of voters opting for parties that they consider most competent to deal with specific issues has been frequently applied to position issues as well. The competence issue ownership literature has found competence considerations to affect the vote in a quite robust manner (e.g. Bellucci, 2006; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012; Lanz 2017).

There is another variant of the issue ownership argument that yields a third dimension of issue voting. Initiated by van der Brug (2004) and Bellucci (2006), some scholars have recently

started to talk about ‘associative’ issue ownership (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). The idea is that people tend to vote for parties that they consider to be especially *committed* to tackle the policy issues they care about. This work holds that issue voting is not only a matter of agreeing with parties positionally and of considering parties as competent to deal with specific policy issues, but appreciating the priority parties give to specific issues. This recent, and smaller, variant of issue voting scholarship has produced evidence that commitment perceptions also affect the vote (Bellucci 2006; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012; Lachat, 2014).

Thus, three analytically different issue considerations seem to have an impact on voting behavior. However, most of the referenced work just focused on just one of these dimensions without including the others. Empirical work examining the three issue voting dimensions at the same time is, as far as we can tell, almost entirely lacking. Some rare work combines the positional and competence accounts. Green and Hobolt’s (2008) study of British elections finds that both positional and competence considerations play a role, and that over time the effect of position has withered while the effect of competence has become stronger. As the distance between the two main parties and their electorates—Labour and the Conservatives—has declined since the end of the 1980s, voters have more difficulties distinguishing parties’ positions and thus more strongly rely on their perception of party competence. This study, though, used a proxy measure of issue competence—parties were rated as being capable of ‘strong government’—which does not directly tap parties’ competence to handle specific issues. Bélanger and Meguid’s (2008) work on Canada is another sporadic example of a study combining positional and competence considerations as driving the vote. They find that both matter but find the dynamic to be different for position than for valence issues.

Studies combining other dimensions are even more rare. Van der Brug’s (2004) study in the Netherlands is the only one we know of that combines the position and commitment dimensions of issue voting. He finds no main effect of perceived commitment of a party towards

a specific issue. Instead, the effect of commitment is mediated by position. By emphasizing a certain issue, parties affect voters' perception that the party is committed to an issue but this perception has no direct influence on the vote. Rather, it leads to a change in voters' perception of parties' ideological position and this, in turn, has an effect on the vote. Based on a non-representative Belgian convenience sample, Walgrave et al. (2012) incorporated competence and commitment measures and found both to matter for voting in 2009. While the competence effect is a main effect in this Belgian study, the effect of commitment is moderated by issue salience.

The only study incorporating all three dimensions of issue voting is, to the best of our knowledge, Lachat's (2014) work on the 2011 Swiss elections. Focusing on position issues, he finds that positional considerations directly affect voters' party utilities for almost all issues, and the same applies for the competence dimension. The effect of commitment considerations, in contrast, is moderated by positional congruence. Only when people agree with a party on an issue, does their perception of whether the party is committed to tackle the issue matter for their vote. Although this study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how different issue-related considerations jointly affect the vote, it draws on a problematic competence measure that asks for the party that has the 'best solutions' for a given issue. This question wording clearly confounds voters' assessment of party competence with positional considerations (see for example: Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2015). Thus, it is hard to know what Lachat's results actually imply for the three dimensions of issue voting. Moreover, the dependent variable in Lachat's paper is the propensity to vote and not the actual vote. Thinking about a party as a potential receiver of your vote and actually voting for that party are different things.

In sum, there are at least three ways in which voters' issue considerations may influence their voting. Given that almost no prior studies simultaneously include the three dimensions in

models of the vote, we do not really know to what extent each of the three dimensions autonomously, controlling for the other dimensions, impact which party a voter chooses, nor do we have a good sense of how the effects of the three dimensions are conditioned by one another.

### **Data and Methods**

We test the three dimensions of issue voting on Belgian data, a parliamentary democracy with a proportional electoral system. Belgium is a federal state with important competences (e.g. education) being decentralized under regional rule. There is not a unified party system but a separate Flemish and Francophone party space—Francophone parties only compete in Wallonia while Flemish parties only compete in Flanders. Therefore, we can consider Belgium as consisting of two separate regional cases (we neglect the complex bilingual Brussels case here because data for this was unavailable). Party systems in both regions are quite strongly fragmented, with six sizeable parties in Flanders and five in the Francophone part of the country. In his comparative study of the effect of issue competence perceptions on voting, Lanz (2017) found that the effect of issue voting is larger in systems with a fragmented party landscape: In a crowded system, voters have to use more subtle distinctions between parties, such as whether they are competent or not, to be able to pick a party out of the large number of parties on offer. A similar logic may apply to the distinction between the different dimensions of issue voting: the more parties there are, the more voters employ more subtle distinctions between parties in order to pick a party. If this is true, then the Belgian case is a most likely case to find that the three issue voting dimensions independently affect the vote.

Evidence comes from the last national election survey in Belgium, specifically the post-electoral, second wave of the 2014 national election study implemented via telephone. The 2014 elections resulted in a large victory of the Flemish-nationalist party N-VA in Flanders. Issue-wise, the elections were not exceptional but the same ‘eternal’ issues dominated the campaign

and voters' concerns, being employment and the economy (see Table 5 below). The initial sample of surveyed voters (N=4,511) was randomly drawn from the state's national register. The first wave was implemented before the elections and was done in a face-to-face fashion. First wave response rate was 45% (N=2,019). Of that sample, 76% (N=1,532) participated in the second post-electoral wave after the elections of May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Note that item non-response causes the actual N in the analyses to be slightly lower.

The dataset consists of unique respondent-party combinations. The dependent variable is the reported *Party Vote* registered after the elections. It is coded as 1 if a voter voted for the party and 0 if s/he did not. The three issue considerations were tapped with regard to eight issues: employment, environment, crime, immigration, economy, state reform, defense and taxes. These issues represent a mix of position and valence issues. The three issue considerations were measured using the question wording as presented in Table 1. Note that the measures of *Issue Position* and *Issue Competence* are pretty straightforward, while for *Issue Commitment*, we use an indirect question, querying respondents about the party they spontaneously think about when thinking about the issue. Experimental question wording work has showed that this measure correlates strongly with questions tapping into commitment considerations more directly (Walgrave et al., 2016), as prolonged attention and commitment to an issue is expected to result in "*an established link between a party and an issue*" which can easily be brought to mind (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012, 3). To avoid contamination of the commitment measure, we measured commitment first, then competence, then position.

<Table 1 here>

Given the nature of the dataset with several unique party-respondent combinations per respondent, we estimate conditional logit models, which is customary in models of vote choice (see, e.g. Oskarson, Oscarsson, and Boijje 2015 for a similar approach). We present two sets of models. First, we present models that regress vote choice on the three dimensions (position,

competence, commitment) on the respondents' most important issue. Respondents' most important issue was determined by asking them which of the eight issues was the most important when determining who to vote for. This allows us to assess the impact of highly salient issues. Second, we present models that regress vote choice on the full breadth of the dataset (3 dimensions\*8 issues).

We also add two control variables. First, we add dichotomous variables for each *party*, with the largest party as reference category (Flanders: Flemish Nationalists-N-VA; Wallonia: Parti Socialiste-PS). Second, we control for *Left-Right Distance*. Respondents were asked to place themselves and the main political parties of their region on an 11-point left-right scale. The variable grasps the absolute difference between the respondents' and the parties' position. Note that conditional logit models do not allow adding variables that are situated at the individual level. Only variables that vary across the choices (i.e. parties) can be included. This is why our models contain a limited number of control variables.

### Results

Table 2 presents the results of two conditional logit regressions that regress vote choice on respondents' perceptions of the parties as being in agreement with them, competent, and committed on their most important issue. Note that there is no collinearity issue, as the three determinants of issue voting are sufficiently independent<sup>ii</sup>.

<Table 2 around here>

Results demonstrate that the three dimensions of issue voting all have a significant impact on the vote: in both regions, the coefficients are highly significant, and also substantial. In Flanders, the marginal effect of being seen as in agreement/competent/committed on the most important issue results in an increased probability to vote for that party with 12%, 6% and 3%<sup>iii</sup>, respectively. For Wallonia, these figures are 11%, 7% and 11%, respectively. As such, the



impact of especially *Issue Commitment* seems to differ between the regions, whereas *Issue Competence* and *Issue Position* have similar effect sizes in both regions.

To investigate the robustness of the three dimensions' impact on the vote, we present models that investigate the impact of commitment, competence and position for each issue separately. We focus here on the marginal effects of the three issue dimensions on the vote, based on the model estimates, which allows us to investigate not just the direction of effects, but also their magnitude. The models include the same controls (party dummies and left-right distance) and are available upon request.

Table 3 shows the probability changes caused by a shift in an issue dimension from 0 to 1. For example, when a party is seen as committed (1) versus not committed (0) on employment, this increases the probability that people vote for the party with 6% in Flanders, and 5% in Wallonia. The bold table entries indicate marginal effects that are significantly different from zero; the non-bold entries are not significant and should be disregarded. Note that all significant entries have a positive sign, as expected. As we cannot include issue salience in the models directly due to the use of conditional logit models, Table 3 also contains the percentage of respondents that considered this issue to be their most important issue.

<Table 3 around here>

In both regions, position considerations have a quite robust effect on the vote. Although the significance of the effects varies, across the eight different issues and the two regions, voters that are in agreement with a party on an issue have a higher probability to vote for the party compared to disagreeing voters. The only exception to this trend is state reform in Wallonia (but this effect is not significant). In Wallonia especially, it seems that issue salience matters: The significant effect occurs for the most salient issue (employment).

With regard to competence considerations, the evidence is more mixed. Although in Flanders the impact is positive for seven out of eight issues, the magnitude and significance of

the effects varies much more compared to positional agreement. Instead of an across the board effect, it appears that the role of competence in issue voting is more contingent upon the issue, with a few issues demonstrating strong effects (state reform and taxes), and more limited effects for most others. This mixed impact is also apparent in Wallonia with several issues exerting large effects on the vote (with low overall significance, due to the lower N for this region) and two issues with negative effects.

For the commitment dimension, similar conclusions can be drawn: the role of commitment considerations seems to be very contingent, with no significant effects in Flanders. That said, for several issues the marginal effect is substantial—employment 6%, environment 9% and State Reform 4%—but the large standard errors indicate that for the owners of these issues, the effect on the vote is very inconsistent. We assume that these issue-specific commitment perceptions matter, but only for part of the electorate. In Wallonia, we find a similar pattern: only a single issue is significant (economy), although for several issues we find large effects—but just as much we find issues for which commitment has a (non-significant) negative effect on the vote. As such, the impact of commitment seems highly variable depending on the issue at stake.

A final question is whether the effects of the three considerations are conditioning each other. Lachat (2014), for example, found in Switzerland that there only is a positive effect of commitment considerations on the vote for voters who agreed positionally with the party on the issue at stake. We added two interactions in both most important issue models presented in Table 3: *Issue Position \* Issue Competence* and *Issue Position \* Issue Commitment* (full model results available upon request). None of these four interactions turned out to be statistically significant. So, it appears that the three issue considerations do not condition each other. The main effects of the three dimensions seem to tell the major part of the story.

## Conclusion

Starting from the observation that voting scholars came up with three different issue evaluations of parties but that these three considerations had hardly been confronted, our aim here was to examine whether positional, competence and commitment considerations each independently explain voting behavior. Drawing on novel evidence from Belgium, we confirm, we believe for the first time, that the three sorts of considerations each separately, and controlling for each other, contribute to explaining which party people vote for. In other words, the three issue considerations work in an additive fashion and, together, explain a bigger part of the vote than separately. Further, our evidence suggests that the three issue considerations do not strengthen or weaken each other's effect. However, some of the effects found are contingent upon the issue. Effects are most robust when it comes to a voter's most salient issue, as all three considerations then exert a substantive influence on a voter's choice. Position considerations seem to matter across the board for most issues, while the effect of competence and commitment considerations is more selective and remains confined to specific issues. This also explains why positional considerations exert, overall, the largest impact on the vote. With a few exceptions, these patterns hold across the two political systems we looked at here.

Further research into the conditionality of these effects is warranted. For example, the fact that we did not find moderation while others did in other countries suggests that a country's specific context may play a role. Moreover, the distinct effect of the three issue considerations may vary across individuals with more politically sophisticated voters more willing and able to distinguish parties and issues on the three dimensions while the less sophisticated do not (see for an example: Stubager, Seeberg, & So, 2018). The conditional logit models do not allow for these variables to be included, but (if available) switching the dependent variable to electoral utilities could provide a solution in this regard. Another avenue for further research is to go deeper into the differences across issues. We saw here that—apart from the most important

issue where effects were stable and robust—effects varied substantially between issues. We do not fully grasp what explains these differences.

The real-world implications of our findings are obvious. Issue competition between parties is more complex than has been argued previously. Parties not only take positions on issues, they also display their competence, and advertise their commitment. And all three strategies may affect the vote. The multidimensionality of issue competition boosts the leeway parties have to compensate for weaknesses on one dimension on one issue with a strength on another dimension with regard to another issue. Parties' selective emphasis strategies (Budge & Farlie, 1983b) may not only drive the issues they address, but also the dimension of the issues they address – focusing on competence, commitment or position. This creates even more opportunities 'to talk past each other'.

The take-home message from the study is straightforward. Issue voting entails more than evaluating parties' position on issues. At least two other partially independent considerations enter the equation. A richer understanding of issue voting and of parties' issue strategies implies incorporating these other dimensions in our thinking about *how* issues matter.

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## TABLES

Table 1

Measures of the three issue considerations.

Concept	Question wording	Coding
Issue Position	<i>When you think of these issues, can you indicate with which parties' positions you generally agree? You can mark multiple parties.</i>	Takes a value of 1 if the respondent marked the party as agreeing with it, and 0 if the respondent did not.
Issue Competence	<i>Which party do you consider best able to implement its program concerning ISSUE, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the party?</i>	Takes a value of 1 if the party is mentioned, 0 if not.
Issue Commitment	<i>Which party do you spontaneously think about when you think about ISSUE?</i>	Takes a value of 1 if the party is mentioned, 0 if not.



Table 2

Effect of position, competence and commitment perceptions with regard to most important issue on vote choice.

Variable	Flanders		Wallonia	
	Coeff	S.E.	Coeff	S.E.
Issue Commitment Most Important Problem	0.38**	(0.12)	0.72***	(0.14)
Issue Competence Most Important Problem	0.62***	(0.12)	0.45**	(0.15)
Issue Position Most Important Problem	1.12***	(0.11)	0.69***	(0.14)
Left-Right Distance	-0.60***	(0.06)	-0.58***	(0.07)
Log likelihood	-862.908		-551.836	
N <sub>observations</sub>	5,296		2,820	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.37		0.34	

Note: coefficients of party dummies omitted for brevity. \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Table 3

Marginal effect of commitment, competence and position perceptions on vote choice.

Issue	Flanders, marginal effect in % of...			Issue Salience	Wallonia, marginal effect in % of...			Issue Salience
	Commitment	Competence	Position		Commitment	Competence	Position	
Employment	6%	2%	5%	39%	5%	0%	<b>17%</b>	50%
Environment	9%	3%	<b>11%</b>	9%	7%	8%	8%	8%
Crime	-2%	0%	<b>8%</b>	7%	7%	7%	2%	5%
Immigration	-3%	3%	<b>11%</b>	6%	-5%	1%	5%	7%
Economy	-1%	2%	<b>9%</b>	27%	<b>11%</b>	-3%	7%	27%
State Reform	4%	<b>7%</b>	<b>9%</b>	3%	5%	6%	-4%	3%
Defense	-2%	-2%	3%	0%	-1%	-7%	6%	0%
Taxes	-1%	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	8%	-2%	9%	2%	8%
Mean Marginal Effect	<i>1%</i>	<i>3%</i>	<i>8%</i>		<i>3%</i>	<i>3%</i>	<i>5%</i>	

*Note:* Issue salience is the % of voters that indicated this issue was the most important issue. Bold table entries indicate that the marginal effect is significantly different from zero ( $p < .05$ )



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<sup>i</sup> We talk about voting for parties in this paper because we are dealing with a system in which parties matter more than candidates, but this mostly applies to candidate voting as well.

<sup>ii</sup> Spearman's Rank Order Correlations (Rho) between the three issue considerations lie between .37 (issue position and issue commitment) and .51 (issue position and issue competence).

<sup>iii</sup> In Flanders, the extreme right (Vlaams Belang) is blocked from government participation by a 'Cordon Sanitaire'. As this might affect respondents' competence evaluations, we also ran the model excluding this party. The results were highly similar, with a marginal effect of 14% for agreement, 7% for competence, and 3% for commitment.