

The independence echo: the rise of the constitutional question in Scottish election manifestos and voter behaviour

Zachary Greene Fraser McMillan

University of Strathclyde

University of Glasgow

Introduction

Voter and political party priorities dynamically interact throughout the representation process. Scholars show that while parties and governments respond to voter opinion shifts (Klüver and Spoon 2016), voters respond by assuming conflicting positions (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Although many studies move beyond the competing expectations that parties dogmatically follow public opinion - or the position espoused by Key (1966) that “the voice of the people is but an echo” of elite preferences - the nature of the relationship between party and voter preferences is misunderstood. The relationship between issue priorities and positions on issues remains unexplained. Appeals on prominent issues such as the independence movement in Scotland likely not only reflect parties’ strategic appeals to attract and mobilize core voters, but also engender a response from voters that previously had only weakly formed or latent preferences over devolution and independence.

In this paper, we connect research on issue competition and governmental responsiveness to explore the relationship between party and voter preferences and priorities. We propose that parties’ appeals on issues like independence reflect a diffusion process that works through public opinion; the electoral success of issue entrepreneurs like the Scottish National Party (SNP) affect the strategies of other parties as they respond to public opinion. We contend that by emphasizing the issue, the SNP increased the public salience of the issue. This, in turn, led rival parties campaign on the publicly salient Scottish constitutional issue (CI). This process created a dynamic cycle wherein increased partisan attention lead voters to adopt firmer positions on the issue, prompting further shifts in party position and emphasis.

We evaluate hypotheses by focusing on the issue of Scottish independence, which rose to prominence after the 1999 opening of the Scottish Parliament (SP). Ironically, the transfer of power to Edinburgh had been expected to quell calls for independence, an idea which had rarely attracted the support of more than a third of voters (Scottish Social Attitudes). Yet, the SNP, primarily focused on attaining independence, entered government before the new institutions were even a decade old after narrowly winning the 2007 election. In a surprise upset, the SNP then won a majority of seats in 2011, using this position to hold an independence referendum in 2014.

Though the referendum failed, a slim majority against independence emerged as the new status quo in public opinion. Public polarisation on the issue has had significant ripple effects at Holyrood and Westminster elections. The increased salience of the constitutional question reshaped Scottish politics, affected UK-wide elections and government formation, and complicated the UK’s exit from the EU. The issue has become the defining axis of Scottish party competition and now acts as a conditioning factor in public opinion formation. This is the context in which we explore our expectations of elite-driven issue entrepreneurship.

We combine data from the British Election Study (BES) from 2007, 2011 and 2016 with evidence from 25 party election manifestos since the formation of the Parliament. To isolate change in parties’ priorities on CIs, we perform unsupervised

content analysis of Scottish party manifestos to identify the attention, framing and timing of emphasis each party gives these issues (Roberts et al. 2013). Pairing estimates with voters' issue priorities in the BES, we find that the increased importance of independence to the SNP coincided with party identifiers evaluating the issue as salient. Yet, parties' positions on independence shape how their appeals influence voter priorities. Appeals by parties prioritising the union or devolution had the opposite effect. As the language used to identify with the issue has positional consequences, voters identifying with these parties experienced a decreased likelihood of perceiving independence as a top priority.

A priority is to explore the content of Scottish manifestos using unsupervised automated content analysis. The 25 manifestos include 16,382 sentences, limiting any individual's ability to hand code these documents. Therefore, manifestos present a good test case to apply topic models on Scottish political texts. Studies of the representation process following a similar approach have used scaling or topic models to evaluate political texts (Ceron 2012; Genovese 2015; Greene and Haber 2016; Schumacher et al. 2016; Boussalis et al. 2018; Ceron and Greene 2019). We follow a topic modelling approach to map attention to independence and how issues related to devolution evolved. To this end, we present evidence that unsupervised learning models can be applied to the case of Scottish manifestos and that these tools can distinguish the language of post-devolution politics.

The results provide evidence consistent with a dynamic theory of voter and party responsiveness (de Sio and Weber 2014; Neundorf and Adams 2018). Parties face few incentives to adopt issues less salient to voters, but an increase in an issue's salience to a key constituency likely encourages parties to address them. Likewise, voters may hold ambiguous positions on issues they place little value on, but when parties bring the issue to the forefront, voters respond by considering the issue more important. Our analysis focuses on issues' salience to parties and voters, but topic model results reveal that the framing of important issues creates a pathway through which parties and voters take distinct positions. Ultimately, cross-national studies of issue competition will enable more conclusive tests of the precise causal pathway.

The Scottish Political Context

Independence was a niche concern before devolution. The SNP had enjoyed few electoral successes, with the unionist Scottish Labour dominant for decades. Following the experience of Thatcherism, which highlighted the UK's "democratic deficit" to Scottish voters (McGarvey and Cairney, 2013), reluctant unionist elites warmed to devolution as a means to contain nationalism. As then-MP Lord Robertson proclaimed in 1995, devolution would "kill nationalism stone-dead" (Arnott and Ozna 2010). From this perspective, Scotland is an unlikely case for elite-driven issue entrepreneurship.

Rather than quell support for independence, however, devolution catalysed it. In 2007, at the third devolved election, the SNP won a plurality of seats. Four years later, the party unexpectedly won a majority and held an independence referendum in 2014 with UK government agreement. Though the "Yes Scotland" campaign was unsuccessful, losing by a closer-than-expected 45-55 margin

(Renwick, 2014), Scotland had reached the brink of independence less than two decades after Robertson's prediction. The issue now dominates Scottish politics.

According to Johns and Mitchell (2016), one third of anti-independence voters chose the SNP in 2011. This became unimaginable after the referendum; SNP-voting unionists virtually disappeared. Meanwhile, Scottish Conservatives, for generations a "toxic" electoral prospect (Cairney and McGarvey 2013), positioned themselves as defenders of unionism. This strategy fuelled a reversal in electoral fortunes in 2016 as the party became the second-largest and recorded their best Scottish Westminster performance in a generation the following year.

These electoral earthquakes illustrate the extent to which the Scottish political system has crystallised around the constitutional cleavage. As Lundberg argues, new institutions strengthened separatist sentiments by activating the "centre-periphery cleavage" (2013). We argue that explicit elite appeals were central to activation. We draw on party competition and voter responsiveness literature to propose an elite-driven theory of issue diffusion.

Party Competition and Issue Salience

Despite substantial scholarly attention, the relationship between public issue salience, party issue emphasis and issue positions in the context of issue emergence remains murky. We incorporate insights from literatures on positional and issue competition to propose a perspective on how issues emerge and diffuse, accounting for ways newly prominent issues motivate voter and party behaviour.

Historically, scholars emphasize the importance of party and voter *positions* and *salience*. Research on party positions and issue competition developed in relative isolation, offering little perspective on how they jointly influence party and voter goals.¹ In spatial conceptions of party competition, parties adopt positions within a policy space and voters calculate the expected utility of competing options, voting for the closest party. Parties adopt vote-maximising positions on the most important dimension of conflict and shift in response to competitors, public opinion and the economy (Adams 2012). However, these perspectives rarely assume more than one dimension of conflict or account for the importance of the issues on which positions are taken, implying that issue salience is disconnected from positional competition. Yet, position and salience present two dimensions of policy orientations: the direction and intensity of preferences on an issue (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1987).

Alternatively, issue competition theories emphasize electoral constituencies, electoral loss, governmental experience, and the scope of conflict to explain issue salience (Greene 2016, 2018). Parties adopt issues important to historical

¹ Although distinct concepts, issue salience and position relate. A party ignoring an issue (zero salience) has an unclear position on it. Taking up issues necessitates taking positions. Voters may infer parties' positions on latent issues, but ultimately parties choose whether and how to address them, even those they deem unimportant. Most measures of issue position from textual sources exacerbate the problem as position is a count of opposing issue statements and salience is the count of total statements.

constituencies (Hibbs 1977) while seeking out issues that resonate with voters. Those issues which do not increase parties' electoral success.

Issue ownership theories also focus on the battle to define prominent campaign issues. Through a similar conception, parties emphasize issues on which they have so strong a positive reputation that they "own" the issue (Petrocik, 1996). Parties foster reputations by repeatedly emphasizing issues in campaigns and enacting policies in office. The yield an issue provides in terms of partisan and voter support further structure parties' likelihood of emphasizing issues (de Sio and Weber 2014).

Voters, in response, support parties when elections are contested over their issues, as citizens evaluate them more positively (Egan 2013). Issue competition theories find contested ownership, however. Bélanger and Meguid (2008) show that voters only respond to parties' appeals on issues salient to those voters. The perceived distance to a party's position further bias voters' perceptions, while partisanship predicts competence evaluations (van der Bruge 2004; Vegetti 2014). The economy and perceptions of unity also constrain policy reputations (Green and Jennings 2012; Greene and Haber 2015).

Finally, theories of issue emergence predict that issues arise when parties negatively associate with previously salient issues. Evidence from Europe shows that parties address new issues or make novel appeals on non-economic dimensions when voters negatively evaluate their positions on the left-right dimension (Hobolt and de Vries 2015). Large parties take distinct positions in response to new issues and parties (Meguid 2005). This discussion holds implications for the rise of the independence issue.

The Rise of the Scottish Constitutional Question

The SNP always supported independence. However, the issue remained cordoned off until the party experienced electoral success. Public opinion on independence remained static for generations. The SNP legislated for the 2014 referendum *despite* little chance of victory. Although they failed to achieve independence, the separatists' campaign changed public opinion so significantly that "the winners lost and the losers won" (McCrone 2019).

We propose that an elite-level political organisation dedicated to advancing independence was necessary for independence to dominate Scottish politics. The SNP's position helped it obtain power which it wielded to place the issue firmly on the agenda, leading other parties to respond. The increased salience in public opinion (and presence of displaced former SNP-unionists) created incentives for other parties to compete on the issue by taking contrasting positions.

The SNP's pro-independence stance facilitated their electoral success. The party's success in 2007 and 2011 Holyrood (SP) elections was widely ascribed to valence considerations. There has historically been little difference between the SNP and Labour on a left-right dimension² and the parties historically attracted similar

² We present parties' left-right positions, measured by the RMP, in the Appendix (Figure A2 and A3).

voters (Paterson et al. 2001). As Johns et al. state (2009, p. 209), the SNP is “distinct only in terms of nationalist ideology and constitutional preferences”.

Valence, however, relates to more than perceived policy performance, as “valence” in a devolved Scottish context relates to whether a party is seen to “promote Scotland’s interests” (Paterson et al. 2001, p.44). On one metric, the Lib-Lab coalitions delivered in government, with both parties fulfilling most of their campaign promises (McMillan, 2019). Yet, even at the first Holyrood election, this dynamic cost Labour votes relative to its Westminster performance. The SNP’s entrepreneurship on the independence issue positioned it to benefit from Labour’s poor valence evaluations resulting from Labour’s incumbent Westminster counterpart (Johns et al. 2009). Though the SNP relied on committed independence supporters, their image of competence in standing up for Scotland attracted enough independence-sceptical citizens to secure electoral success (Johns and Mitchell 2016).

Negative valence evaluations of Westminster parties provided grounds for independence to emerge and dominate politics. This did not happen automatically. Small parties with distinct issue profiles give more prominence to core issues at elections (Klüver and Spoon 2016). The SNP exemplified this dynamic by emphasising independence (Wagner 2012). Following this logic, we would expect independence to be most prominent in SNP appeals before 2007. We anticipate that the SNP’s electoral success signalled to competitors that a strong independence stance was necessary. Like studies of issue competition (Meguid 2005), we argue that competing parties felt they could attract voters by emphasizing the issue (salience) to distinguish (position) themselves from the SNP’s clear, vote-winning position.

Therefore, we predict that CIs diffused to the Scottish parties following the SNP’s success while making explicit appeals on them. The effect will be strongest for the Conservatives, since their location opposite the SNP on both left-right and constitutional cleavages meant they had little to lose by doing so. We expect Labour and the Liberal Democrats (LD), meanwhile, to exhibit greater caution due to their proximity to the SNP on left-right issues.

H1: Scottish parties increased their attention to constitutional issues following the SNP’s 2007 electoral success.

How should we expect voters to respond? Before the SNP entered government, independence was relatively unpopular. Theories of issue competition offer insights into the emergence of new issues and their impact on voter perceptions. Despite some preliminary evidence that positions and salience are linked (Hobolt and de Vries 2015; Meyer and Wagner 2017), scholars often treat the concepts as unrelated. We turn to studies of political responsiveness to consider voter reactions to newly salient issues.

The Party-Voter Link - Independence and Responsiveness

Literature on governmental responsiveness and representation demonstrates that policy responds to changing demands of public opinion (Stimson et al. 1995; Ezrow et al. 2011). In addition to substantive congruence, scholars also show that government agendas respond to fluctuating issue salience (Klüver and Spoon 2016; Reher 2016). Completing this dynamic cycle, policy outcomes reshape voter preferences (Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

Questions remain as to how specific issues disrupt party competition and voting behaviour (Green-Pedersen 2007). As theories of party strategy imply, political “losers” are more likely to act as issue entrepreneurs; parties often attempt to reverse their fortunes by adopting overlooked issues (Hobolt and de Vries 2015). The Scottish case defies this tendency.

We outline a process wherein the SNP’s electoral success prompted other parties to evaluate the importance of independence to voters. Voters’ attitudes towards issues derive from diverse factors, including elite cues. However, opposed party positions on polarising issues like independence lead partisans to respond differently. Building on a theory of voter responsiveness to elite appeals, we argue that Scottish parties’ distinct positions exhibited towards independence influenced the issue’s salience among supporters.

Scholars contend that long-held values and information about political context determine voters’ attitudes. Voters’ political socialisation and long-term identities correlate with their attitudes (Converse et al. 1980). Factors like economic conditions influence the issues voters perceive as important (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Yet, the distinctiveness of parties’ offerings plays a key role in forming voters’ preferences and perceiving issues as important. Clearer party alternatives improve voters’ ability to express values as political attitudes (Freire 2008).

Voters’ underlying preferences rely on more stable values and identities. They evaluate important contemporary issues by using information about their political environment. Voters use information derived from traditional and social media to prioritise issues (Ansollebehere and Iyengar 1994; McCombs and Reynolds 2009).

However, voters face challenges and costs to remain informed. These costs lead voters to rely on heuristics to make informed decisions. For example, voters use partisan labels to select candidates (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Pyeatt and Yanus (2016) show that voters use politicians’ characteristics like gender to provide information that competes with partisan heuristics to assess party ideology. Ultimately, reliance on heuristics creates opportunities for party effects on voter salience.

Literature on heuristics and cue-taking implies that issue salience to voters depends on the issues parties address. Indeed, empirical studies suggest voters take cues from preferred parties on which issues to prioritise. Issues therefore change in salience depending on their prominence in party platforms (Hooghe and Marks 2005; Goren et al. 2009). Even if voters largely ignore parties’ campaigns, the SNP’s clear ownership and prioritisation of the independence issue meant their surprise electoral success highlighted its importance to voters.

Furthermore, independence is naturally polarizing. Divisive wedge issues of this kind cause voters to find the issue more salient (Hillygus and Shields 2008). Spoon and Klüver (2015) add that this dynamic incentivises parties to prioritise such

issues. This perspective is consistent with ‘directional theory’ which portrays issues as a choice between two distinct solutions (Listhaug et al. 1990). Parties take opposing sides on an issue, appealing to different sides of the electorate. Scotland exhibits this dynamic; all mainstream parties display clear pro- or anti-independence positions. As preferences over independence polarized, the effect of parties’ positions on voter perceptions on these issues likely also increased (Druckman et al. 2013). The increased attention, we predict, leads each party’s supporters to adopt distinctive positions.

This discussion implies that voters respond to increased partisan appeals by evaluating the issue as more important. Multiple perspectives suggest that by emphasizing independence, parties primed voters to adopt clearer positions (Freire 2008; Jacobson 2015). This had the individual effect of mobilizing supporters on an issue by convincing them it was important and, therefore, set the system agenda by changing public opinion (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2003). The logic follows that parties respond to electorally successful competitors’ appeals by emphasising the issue more. This dynamic characterises a cyclical, reinforcing party-voter relationship. If a party increases an issue’s salience by priming voters, others react to public opinion by emphasising it more to appear responsive (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016). Strong partisans take cues about which issues are important from party campaigns (Greene et al. 2018). Applying this logic to Scotland, we expect the SNP’s success increased the salience of independence among potential independence supporters, particularly those that identified with the SNP. This perspective leads us to the following hypotheses.

H2: SNP identifiers are more likely to identify independence as an issue priority when the party places more emphasis on CIs in its manifesto.

We expect other parties to respond to this by increasing attention to CIs. But, how might their supporters react? In contrast to SNP identifiers, we expect the salience of independence among identifiers of anti-independence parties to *reduce* in response to increased emphasis. We propose two reasons for decreased partisan emphasis. First, unionist parties frequently link anti-independence appeals to valence considerations, portraying independence as a distraction from other issues³ - “get on with the day job” has been a common refrain since the SNP took power. As such, even as unionist parties emphasise constitutional concerns, they prime supporters to prioritise other issues. Second, unlike valence issues (e.g. “education”, “crime”) the issue is a polarised one which lacks a neutral descriptor that both sides use (e.g. “welfare”, “Brexit”). Pro-independence voters who prioritise the issue simply refer to it as “independence”. However, it would make little sense for anti-independence voters to refer to “independence” as a priority. They may refer to “staying in the UK”, “the union”, “preventing independence” or other formulations; lack of a common label makes these voters less likely to identify it as a priority the

³ We present qualitative examples of this rhetoric from Conservative and Lib Dem manifestos in the STM discussion in the Appendix.

more prominent and polarised it becomes in public debate. In combination, we expect these factors to result in the following hypothesis.

H3: Non-SNP party identifiers are less likely to identify independence as an issue priority when their respective party places more emphasis on constitutional issues in its manifesto.

Overall, we posit that the emergence of the independence issue is an exemplar of elite-driven issue entrepreneurship. Placed in a non-majoritarian institutional setting and centre-periphery context, the SNP's emphasis on CIs created a feedback loop of increasing party attention and public salience and polarisation.

Research Design

To evaluate these hypotheses, we examine the rise of CIs in Scotland. We believe that this case presents a difficult test of elite-led issue emergence and diffusion. Foremost, Scottish parties' known positions and the static state of public opinion over independence left scant room for campaigns to change public opinion. Scottish parties had well-known positions on independence, but the issue only achieved public importance after 2011. Further, the multi-level party structure (UK versus Scottish parties) and electoral systems (Scottish mixed-member versus UK single-member districts) create limited scope for one party's appeals to diffuse to others. Indeed, despite the constitution's current importance, the Parliament cannot unilaterally change relationships with the UK.

We first undertake automated content analysis on the 25 Scottish election manifestos from five parties with consistent parliamentary representation since 1999. Although the SNP controlled the executive since 2007, the Labour Party was initially the strongest party and governed in coalition with the LDs. We expect that the SNP's surprise victories influenced other parties' emphases on CIs.

To evaluate the rise of CIs, we use the Structural Topic Model (STM; Roberts et al. 2013). The STM uses a pre-defined number of topics to evaluate latent topics contained in a corpus of texts. The STM incorporates content covariates that predict topic prevalence across texts. We pool manifestos and include party-year dummy variables as structural covariates to estimate yearly expected topic proportions for each party.

Although the number of manifestos is small, the large number of sentences (16,382) limits our ability to hand code the corpus. Furthermore, STM enables us to examine the different framings a complex issue like this takes within documents and even sentences. A hand-coded framework like the Regional Manifesto Project (RMP) would not easily facilitate this analysis without multiple issue codes per statement.

We test voter-level hypotheses by combining STM estimates with the BES Scottish subset in 2007, 2011, and 2016. We use a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent considers independence, the constitutional question, devolution or union as the country's most important issue (MII). We perform subsample analyses on party identifiers given our interest in the effect of parties' issue strategies on those likeliest to pay attention to the parties' emphases, their supporters. We include measures for each party's salience on topics related to independence. We expect that voters attached to a party respond to their campaigns.

We also include individual level controls. We account for respondents' age (logged), education (year finished primary education), gender and household income.⁴ Young, male, low education and income respondents will be more supportive of Scottish independence (Park et al. 2012; Liñeira and Henderson 2019). We present logistic regression estimates with robust standard errors.

Analysis

⁴ We are limited in potential controls as variables across waves of the Scottish Election Study are inconsistent.

We first report descriptive trends in word usage in election manifestos to illustrate the issue's rise in salience. Figure 1 graphs the frequency of four word features relating to independence. We present the frequency of each feature occurrence in the manifestos.⁵

The descriptive overview lends provisional support to our expectations. Foremost, we expect that the SNP pays greater attention to independence and that other parties increase attention following SNP successes in 2007 and 2011. Intriguingly, the SNP reference the term "independence" more frequently than other parties at every election until 2016. After the referendum, though, they substantially reduced emphasis. All other parties increased references, perhaps perceiving that voters' perceptions of the issue (and parties' relative valence) had changed. Taking opposing positions Scottish Conservative and Green parties placed greater emphasis on independence in 2016.

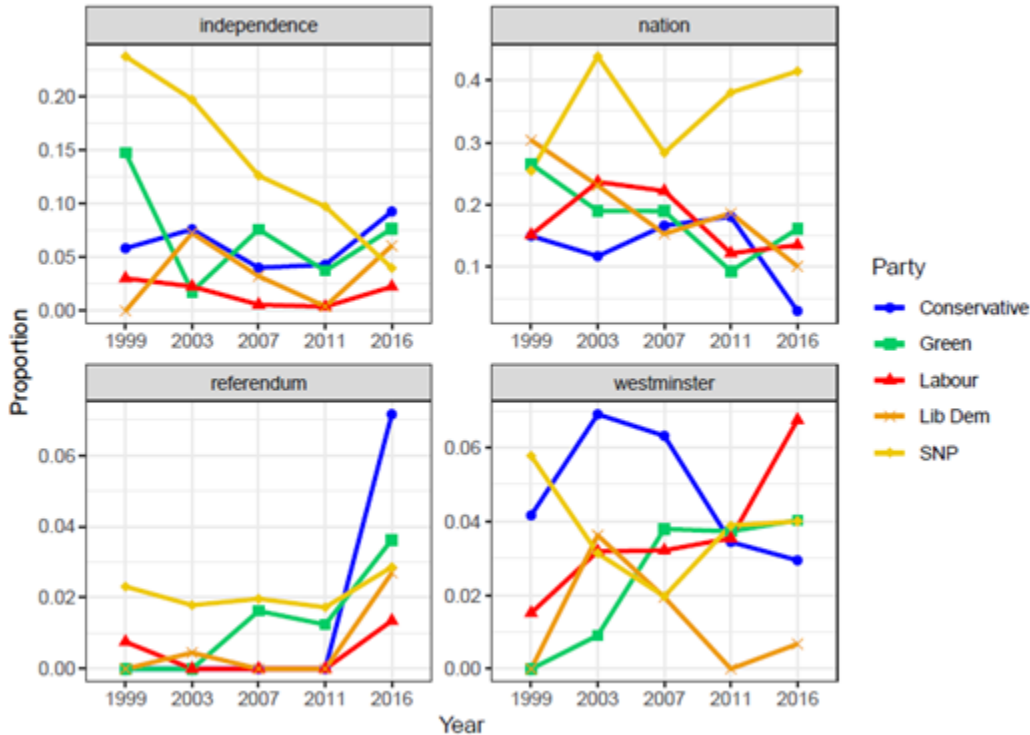
References to the term "referendum" support a similar story. Having avoided the term in their 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 manifestos, Conservatives referenced it 17 times in 2016, more than any other manifesto. This massive increase in attention suggests that they sought to attract votes by emphasising the issue. Conservatives' subsequent electoral success indicates the approach paid off⁶. All other parties also increased references to this term in 2016, with the exception of the SNP, presumably in tacit recognition of the referendum's failure.

Figure 1. Independence Term Frequencies

Feature	Terms
independence	"independen*"
referendum	"referendum"
nation	"nation*"
westminster	"downing", "westminster", "union", "commons"

⁵ We selected terms on face validity, based on a preliminary reading of the manifestos and observation of Scottish campaigns. We measure feature occurrences using Quanteda in R and include wildcards to capture variants on word stems - "nation" ("national", "nations").

⁶ We searched the 2016 Conservative manifesto for "referendum" to ensure mentions referenced independence. 16 of 17 instances do so.



Additional features highlighted in Figure 1 reveal a dynamic related to incumbency and multi-level governance more than independence. We find the smallest counts for “Westminster”, though patterns reflect real-world events. For example, LDs virtually eliminated references to Westminster in 2011. This scarcity likely reflects the party’s recognition that participation in a Conservative-led coalition at UK level was unpopular with Scottish voters. The SNP substantially increased attention to Westminster in 2011, perhaps deflecting blame to the UK government after their own first session in office or demanding increased devolved powers for Scotland.

Finally, the term “nation” accrues the largest number of mentions. Incumbents mention this feature noticeably more than opposition parties, presumably to defend their policy record, although the SNP started from a higher baseline than Labour and the LDs⁷. Those two parties greatly decreased their mentions in 2011 having entered opposition in 2007, while the SNP greatly increased their mentions.

In summary, these simple figures provide some preliminary clues as to the rise of CIs. Most obviously, the Conservative Party leaned heavily on opposition to independence in 2016, while the SNP seemed to decrease attention to the topic. It is also clear that the independence issue rose in prominence after the 2014 referendum.

A Structural Topic Model of Scottish Manifestos

⁷ SNP manifestos were checked to ensure that “nation” reflected more than mentions to the party’s full name, which is used sparingly.

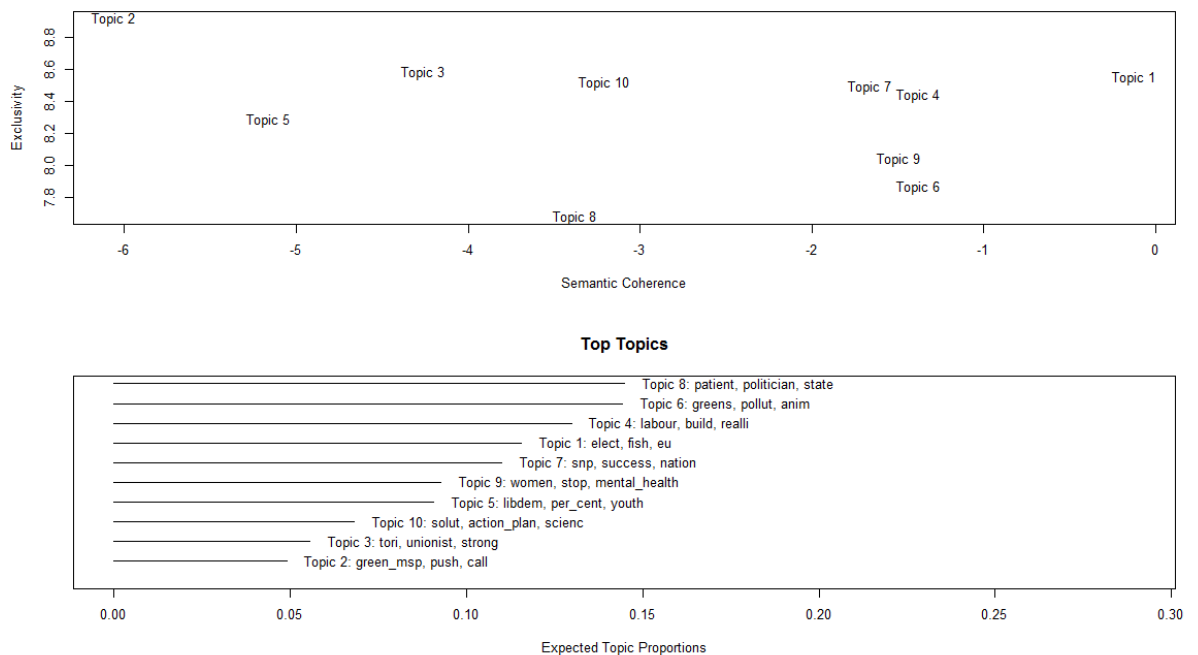
To construct a more comprehensive picture of the manifestos we present STM results. In the main analysis, we present the results of a 10 topic model based on 25 manifestos (4,719 features)⁸, however, we find evidence of an independence dimension with nearly every specification of k ⁹. As the descriptive evidence foreshadows, independence is an important issue in Scottish politics.

We present the basic topic proportions from the 10 topic STM in Figure 2. To ease substantive interpretation of the results, we created a thesaurus of words and phrases that the model interpreted as independence or “indyref” related such as “scottish independence”, “independence referendum” and “devolution”. We create a separate thesaurus for unionist words and phrases. The results show three topics including words related to devolution and Scottish powers. See Table 1 in the Appendix for a list of highest probability words and most frequent/exclusive words for each topic.

Figure 2. STM Topic Quality and Prevalence

⁸ We followed common pre-processing techniques, including converting all words to lower case, reducing words to stems and removing stop words, punctuation, symbols and numbers. We also removed words that did not occur in at least two manifestos and removed a large number of additional terms that did not have obvious substantive meaning. We created a list of collocations (multiple word pairs) which frequently co-occurred within the texts to aid substantive interpretation of the results (e.g. “Scottish Independence”).

⁹ Topic models require the researcher select k , the number of topics. Few substantive guidelines direct this choice as most approaches measure how quickly the computer estimates the model or the coherence/exclusivity of topics. Models including more topics tend to estimate finer grained results but may mask substantively connected issues, while those containing only a small number of topics may unnecessarily conflate issues using similar words. We find that models using smaller and larger numbers of topics lead to substantively similar results. We present the results of a 10 topic model which succinctly captures three frames used to discuss CIs.



The three topics containing references to independence reveal competing frames to discuss CIs. Topic 1 includes words closely related to Scottish Parliament jurisdiction and issues considered important at Scottish level e.g. tension over EU fishing rights.¹⁰ Topic 3 includes references to both independence and unionist positions and discussion of the Scottish school system, communities and taxation powers. This topic likely reflects debate over demands for greater devolution and, perhaps, the linkage of independence positions to valence issues. Finally, Topic 7 includes terms linked to policy initiatives undertaken at the Scottish level and the role of the Parliament in funding and investing in these policies. Other topics include references to specific policy demands, but are not explicitly or closely linked to terms focused on independence.

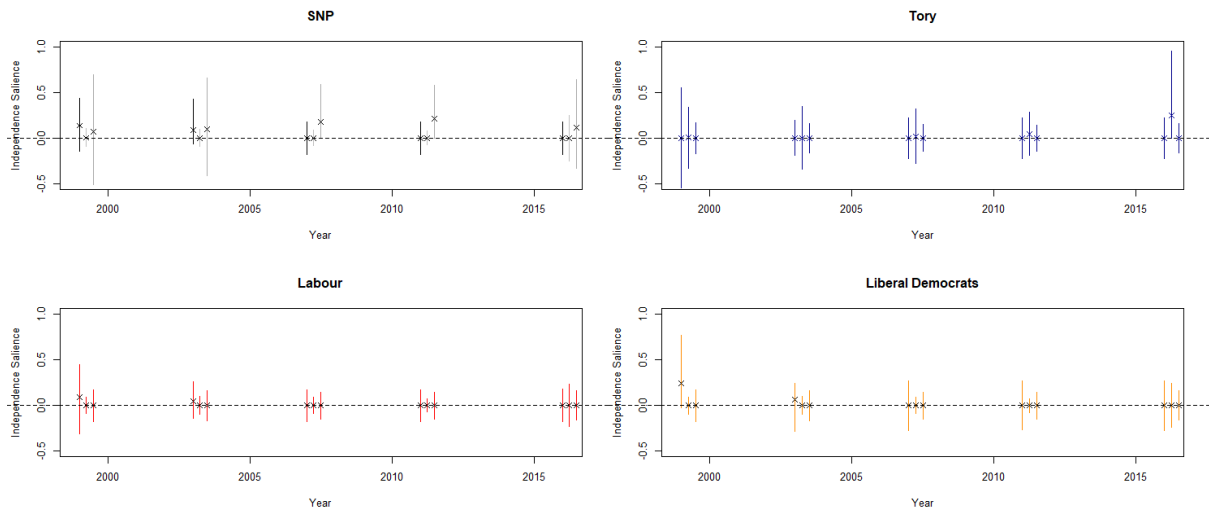
Figure 2 presents the prevalence or expected proportion of the manifestos for each topic and a plot highlighting topic quality. The top cell of Figure 2 illustrates the relative coherence and exclusivity of each topic.¹¹ Topics with greater exclusivity and coherence (higher values in each case) are substantively easier to interpret as they avoid conflating multiple terms and include less overlap with others. The three independence topics (1, 3 and 7) score well on exclusivity and topics 1 and 7 rank well in overall coherence. Topic 3 performs slightly poorer in terms of coherence, likely reflecting the combination of all territorial issues, including devolution, in a single topic. The bottom half of Figure 2 shows that topic 1 and 7 also represent substantial attention, whereas topic 3 is the second from the bottom in estimated

¹⁰ See the Appendix for additional qualitative Topic validation.

¹¹ “Exclusivity” measures the extent to which top words in a topic do not appear as top words in any other topic, whereas “coherence” refers to the co-occurrence of top words in the same documents.

prevalence. A comparison of these results from an automated approach positively correlate with related measures derived from RMP human coded manifestos.¹²

Figure 3. Expected Salience on Independence Related Topics from the STM



Based on these topics, we use party-year dummy variables to predict expected prevalence. We present results for the four largest parties in Figure 3 where the x marks the predicted salience in a year with bars denoting 95% confidence intervals. For each year, we present the expected proportion of attention for topic 1, 3 and 7 consecutively.

Given the procedural nature of Topic 1, it is perhaps unsurprising the SNP, Labour and LDs give it the greatest attention at the first election. The Conservatives barely reference this topic. Other parties focus on these issues to some extent up to the 2007 election. For the SNP, however, this attention is replaced by an alternate frame, Topic 7.

Independence is primarily captured through Topic 3 and 7. The SNP eventually adopts an independence frame exemplified by Topic 7 linking independence to specific devolved Scottish powers. The party's attention increased from a low level in 1999 and peaked in 2007. The attention decreases slightly in 2011 and 2016. In contrast to our first hypothesis, there is not much of a reaction to this attention by the other parties using this frame.

Despite the limited reaction to the rise of attention to Topic 7 by Labour and the LDs after the 2007 and 2011 elections, there is a strong increase in the attention that the Conservatives give to Topic 3 in 2016. Somewhat consistent with our first hypothesis, this attention could be interpreted as a strategic attempt to describe independence in a negative light by highlighting the challenges faced by the SNP

¹² Topic 1 positively correlates with the salience of the RMP centre-periphery dimension (SNP, 0.63, Con, 0.341. Lab, 0.97), but other topics correlate less so (except the Tories, Topic 3: 0.51). The RMP Independence scale correlates less consistently (SNP .05, Con .51, and Labour .97) suggesting that the RMP's single issue coding scheme cannot easily account for diverse framing of issues using an independence framework (Gómez et al. 2018).

government. Conservatives likely perceived independence positions as a negative liability for the SNP and strongly emphasized it to undermine the SNP's position and cement a reputation as unapologetic defenders of the union.

Issue Salience and Voter Priorities

In a final analysis, we predict the likelihood that voters perceive independence as the MII. Using the BES in 2007, 2011 and 2016, we find that this conservative, open-ended measure of voter attention or salience ranges from 8% of voters to almost 14% across years.¹³ Our primary independent variable is the sum of attention on CIs for each party based on the STM results. We present logistic regression results in Table 1.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Analyses of Partisan Identifiers' MII

	SNP	Tory	Labour	Lib Dems
Independence Issue Salience	18.384*** (1.765)	-9.591*** (1.703)	-525.272*** (91.798)	-1814.918*** (437.749)
Household Income	0.150 (0.146)	-0.056 (0.275)	-0.078 (0.225)	0.613 (0.517)
Education	0.085 (0.057)	0.159 (0.107)	0.167+ (0.094)	0.550* (0.238)
ln(Age)	0.169 (0.260)	-0.154 (0.457)	0.398 (0.469)	1.203+ (0.665)
Gender	-0.656*** (0.171)	-0.336 (0.289)	-0.386 (0.280)	-0.783+ (0.472)
Constant	-5.175*** (1.257)	-1.043 (2.098)	-2.570 (2.025)	-7.366* (3.321)
Log Likelihood	-550.860	-190.457	-227.622	-71.341
Chi-Sqr	133.728	38.527	43.847	37.197
N	1547	865	1251	375

Note: Table 1 presents logistic regression coefficients predicting the likelihood that partisan identifiers hold Scottish Independence as the MII in an election. Huber-White Robust standard errors are presented in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed: + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Our second hypothesis predicts that SNP party supporters will be more likely to respond that independence is the MII when the party increases attention to these issues. Hypothesis 3 predicts the inverse relationship for the unionist parties. The results in Table 1 provide suggestive evidence for this perspective.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the coefficient for independence salience in the SNP identifier model is positive and statistically significant at conventional levels. This result indicates that the years that the SNP gave greater attention to independence also saw an increased likelihood that those identifying with the SNP

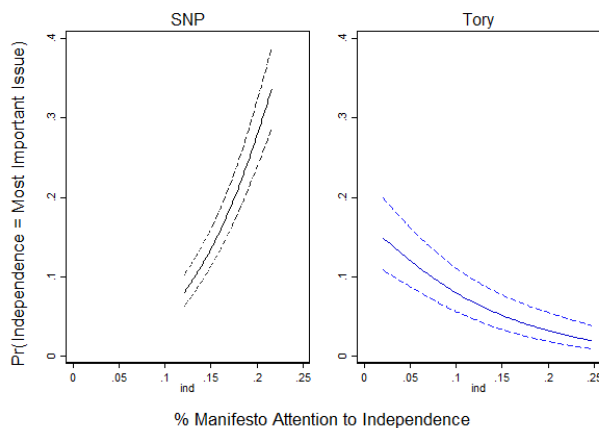
¹³ For a breakdown of voter perceptions by partisan identifiers, see Figure A4 in the Appendix.

consider independence to be the MII. This evidence suggests that the limited attention to CIs in 2016 may have also played a role in reducing the issue’s prominence.

Table 1 also provides evidence consistent with our third hypothesis. In particular, the coefficient for each unionist party’s attention is negative and statistically significant across models. In the years that each party placed greater attention to their positions on CIs, the coefficients show that unionist party identifiers were less likely to consider independence as the MII. The effects are quite large in each case, although limited attention to independence by Labour and LDs offers us little confidence in these coefficients. These results are consistent with the perspective that parties’ attention to CIs encouraged voters to focus on other pressing issues.

We present predicted effects from the estimates in Table 1 for two parties with the clearest effect in Figure 4. The figure demonstrates a strong positive increase in the likelihood of holding an issue important for SNP identifiers when it includes greater manifesto attention to independence. Figure 4 also demonstrates the reverse effect for the Conservatives. In years that Conservatives barely discussed independence, Tory identifiers held similar levels of support to other voters. However, Conservative identifiers displayed a strong decrease in likelihood when the party campaigned on a unionist position.

Figure 4. Predicted Likelihood of holding Independence as MII¹⁴



Control variables in Table 1 provide suggestive evidence as well. For both SNP and Conservative party identifiers, the coefficient for respondent gender indicates that women are less likely to list independence as the MII. Older respondents and those who finished full time education at an older age are more likely to report independence as the MII among Conservative identifiers and to a lesser extent, LD supporters. Income plays an inconsistent role among parties’ supporters.

¹⁴ 95% confidence intervals are estimated from 1000 draws of the variance-covariance matrix in Table 1, models 1 and 2.

Discussion

We argue that the electoral success of a single party focused on a divisive issue can lead other parties and voters to form more specific and salient positions on that issue. From an elite perspective, therefore, the rise of Scottish independence largely owes to the SNP's 2007 surprise success. Although it was a surprisingly close contest, the failure of the independence referendum in 2014 created the context for the Conservatives to adopt a clearer oppositional frame on independence.

We find evidence consistent with our perspective based on a STM predicting parties' attention to CIs and logistic regression of party identifiers' attitudes towards independence. The rise of CIs within the SNP's manifestos coincides with the SNP's success. Conservatives' challenge to the SNP's framing, therefore, provided the party with a means of attracting voters that may have otherwise felt unrepresented on an issue they deeply distrust. We further find evidence that the SNP's attention to independence increases the likelihood that the party's supporters consider independence to be the MII whereas other parties' attention is associated with decreases in the issue's salience with voters. Our findings are consistent with the perspective that as voters' options among parties on a polarised issue become more obvious, voters find it easier to sort in a partisan way along the relevant dimension. These results parallel findings by Bisgaard and Slothuus (2018) who find that elite cues are influential for partisan perceptual gaps.

These results have implications for the study of emergent nationalist movements in countries with strong regional movements such as Catalonia in Spain or Quebec in Canada. The rise of a local political organization can impact the broader debate in a country. Although few took the SNP's stance on independence seriously before 2007, the party's electoral success resulted in the near-realisation of the policy. Other parties likely made the issue more prominent and consequential through pursuant appeals.

Viewed in the context of issue competition, Scottish independence exemplifies a wedge issue. After its rise in salience due to the referendum, a second party successfully staked a claim to the issue by emphasising its *opposition* to the traditional owner's position. Further study of issue dynamics surrounding Scottish independence could be fruitful, especially with regard to "associative" and "competence" dimensions (Walgrave et al., 2014). Our perspective would predict that Scottish voters overwhelmingly associate the SNP as the party of independence, but competence assessments depend on individuals' constitutional preferences.

More generally, these findings speak to the multi-layered relationship between position- and emphasis-based competition. Rather, our findings suggest that different modes of party competition work in tandem. An increase in public salience and party emphasis turned it into a locus of direct confrontation.

As Key (1966) once described, mass opinion echoes elite preferences; the diffusion of ideas among elites likely follows a similar process in response to electoral success. Voters' roles are thus more significant than Key once suggested. Through voting, citizens give life to new (or old) issues alike.

Bibliography

- Adams, James. 2012. Causes and Electoral Consequences of Party Policy Shifts in Multiparty Elections: Theoretical Results and Empirical Evidence. *Annual Review of Political Science* 15(1): 401-419.
- Ansolabehere, S. and Shanto Iyengar. 1994. Riding the wave and claiming ownership over issues: The joint effects of advertising and news coverage in campaigns. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58(3): 335-357.
- Bélanger, Éric, and Bonnie Meguid. 2008. "Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice." *Electoral Studies* 27(3): 477-491.
- Bisgaard, Martin and Slothuus, Rune. "Partisan Elites as Culprits? How Party Cues Shape Partisan Perceptual Gaps". *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2): 456-469.
- Boussalis, Constantine, Travis Coan, and Mirya Holman. 2018. "Climate change communication from cities in the USA." *Climatic Change*: 1-15.
- Cairney, P. and McGarvey, N., 2013. *Scottish Politics: An Introduction* (2nd Edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Cairney, P., 2012. *The Scottish Political System Since Devolution: From New Politics to the New Scottish Government*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Ceron, Andrea. 2012. "Bounded oligarchy: How and when factions constrain leaders in party position-taking." *Electoral Studies* 31(4): 689-701.
- Ceron, Andrea and Greene, Zachary. 2019. "Verba volant, scripta manent? Intra-party politics, party conferences, and issue salience in France." *Party Politics*, DOI:1354068819836034.
- De Sio, Lorenzo and Weber, Till. 2014. "Issue yield: A model of party strategy in multidimensional space." *American Political Science Review* 108(4): 870-885.
- Druckman, James., Erik Peterson, and Rune Slothuus. 2013. "How elite partisan polarization affects public opinion formation." *American Political Science Review* 107 (1): 57-79.
- Egan, Patrick. 2013. *Partisan Priorities: How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ezrow, Lawrence, Catherine De Vries, Marco Steenbergen, and Erica Edwards. 2011. "Mean voter representation and partisan constituency representation: Do parties respond to the mean voter position or to their supporters?" *Party Politics* 17(3): 275-301.

- Farrell, David and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck. 2003. *Do political campaigns matter? campaign effects in elections and referendums*. Routledge.
- Freire, André. 2008. "Party Polarization and Citizens' Left – Right Orientations." *Party Politics* 14(2): 189-209.
- Genovese, Federica. 2015. "Politics ex cathedra: Religious authority and the Pope in modern international relations." *Research & Politics* 2(4): 2053168015612808.
- Gómez, Braulio, Sonia Alonso and Laura Cabeza (2018) Regional Manifestos Project Dataset (Version 11/2018). Available from: www.regionalmanifestosproject.com
- Goren, Paul, Christopher Federico, and Miki Kittilson. 2009. "Source cues, partisan identities, and political value expression." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(4): 805–820.
- Green, Jane. 2007. "When voters and parties agree: Valence issues and party competition." *Political Studies* 55(3): 629–655.
- Green, Jane, and Will Jennings. 2012. "The dynamics of issue competence and vote for parties in and out of power: An analysis of valence in Britain, 1979–1997." *European Journal of Political Research* 51(4): 469–503.
- Green-Pedersen, Christoffer. 2007. "The growing importance of issue competition: The changing nature of party competition in Western Europe." *Political Studies* 55(3): 607–628.
- Greene, Zachary, Jae-Jae Spoon, and Christopher Williams. 2018 "Reading between the Lines: Party Cues and SNP Support for Scottish Independence and Brexit." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 28(3): 307-329.
- Greene, Zachary. 2016. "Competing on the issues: How experience in government and economic conditions influence the scope of parties' policy messages." *Party Politics* 22(6): 809–822.
- Greene, Zachary. 2018. "Being Heard above the Noise: The Role of Incumbent Issue Diversity in Election Campaigns." *Political Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-018-9504-2>.
- Greene, Zachary, and Matthias Haber. 2016. "Leadership Competition and Disagreement at Party National Congresses." *British Journal of Political Science* 46(03): 611–632.

- Hibbs Jr, Douglas. 1977. "Political parties and macroeconomic policy." *The American political science review* 71(04): 1467-1487.
- Hillygus, Sunshine and Shields, T.G., 2008. *The persuadable voter: Wedge issues in presidential campaigns*. Princeton University Press.
- Hobolt, Sara, and Catherine de Vries. 2015. "Issue Entrepreneurship and Multiparty Competition." *Comparative Political Studies* 48(9): 1159-1185.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2005. "Calculation, community and cues: Public opinion on European integration." *European Union Politics* 6(4): 419-443.
- Johns, Robert, James Mitchell, David Denver, and Charles Pattie. 2009. "Valence politics in Scotland: Towards an explanation of the 2007 election." *Political Studies*, 57(1), pp.207-233.
- Johns, Robert, and James Mitchell. 2016. *Takeover: Explaining the Extraordinary Rise of the SNP*. London: Biteback.
- Key, V.O. 1966. *The responsible electorate*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Klüver, Heike, and Spoon, Jae-Jae. 2016. "Who Responds? Voters, Parties and Issue Attention". *British Journal of Political Science* 46(03): 633-654.
- Klüver, Heike, and Iñaki Sagarzazu. 2016. "Setting the agenda or responding to voters? Political parties, voters and issue attention." *West European Politics* 39(2): 380-398.
- Liñeira, Robert and Henderson, Ailsa. 2019. "Risk Attitudes and Independence Vote Choice". *Political Behaviour* (advance online publication): 1-20.
- Listhaug, Ola, Stuart Macdonald, and George Rabinowitz. 1990. "A comparative spatial analysis of European party systems." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 13(3): 227-254.
- Lundberg, Thomas. 2013. "Politics is still an adversarial business: Minority government and mixed-member proportional representation in Scotland and in New Zealand". *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15(4): 609-625.
- Lupia, A., and McCubbins, M.D., 1998. *The democratic dilemma: Can citizens learn what they need to know?* Cambridge University Press.
- McCombs, Maxwell and Amy Reynolds, A., 2009. "How the news shapes our civic agenda." In *Media effects* (pp. 17-32). Routledge.

- McCrone, David. 2019. "Pebble them wi' stanes: Twenty years of the Scottish Parliament". *Scottish Affairs* 28(2): 125-151.
- McMillan, Fraser. 2019. "Devolution, "new politics" and election pledge fulfilment in Scotland, 1999-2011". *British Politics* (advance online publication): 1-19.
- Meguid, Bonnie. 2005. "Competition between unequals: The role of mainstream party strategy in niche party success." *American Political Science Review* 99(03): 347-359.
- Meyer, Thomas M., and Markus Wagner. 2017. "It Sounds Like They are Moving: Understanding and Modeling Emphasis-Based Policy Change." *Political Science Research and Methods*: 1-18.
- Neundorf, Anja and James Adams. 2018. "The micro-foundations of party competition and issue ownership: The reciprocal effects of citizens' issue salience and party attachments." *British Journal of Political Science* 48(2): 385-406.
- Paterson, Lindsay, Alice Brown, John Curtice, Kerstin Hinds et al. 2001. *New Scotland, New Politics?* Edinburgh University Press.
- Petrocik, John. 1996. "Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study." *American journal of political science* 40(3): 825-850.
- Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Utting, D. (eds.) 2012. *British Social Attitudes: the 29th Report*. London: NatCen Social Research.
- Pyeatt, Nicholas, and Alixandra Yanus. 2016. "Sending Mixed Signals: The Role of Partisanship in Evaluations of Political Leaders." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 26(4): 423-434.
- Rabinowitz, George, and Stuart Macdonald. 1989. "A directional theory of issue voting." *American political science review* 83(1): 93-121.
- Reher, Stefanie. 2016. "The effects of congruence in policy priorities on satisfaction with democracy." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 26(1): 40-57.
- Renwick, A., 2014. "Don't trust your poll lead: How public opinion changes during referendum campaigns", in Cowley, P. and Ford, R. (eds), *Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box*, London: Biteback
- Roberts, Margaret. et al. 2014. "Structural Topic Models for Open-Ended Survey Responses." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 1064-1082.

- Schumacher, Gijs, Martijn Schoonvelde, Denise Traber, Tanushree Dahiya, et al. 2016. "EUSpeech: a New Dataset of EU Elite Speeches." In *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Advances in Computational Analysis of Political Text*, p. 75–80.
- Soroka, Stuart and Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of democracy: Politics, public opinion, and policy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Spoon, Jae-Jae, and Heike Klüver. 2015. "Voter polarisation and party responsiveness: Why parties emphasise divided issues, but remain silent on unified issues." *European Journal of Political Research* 54(2): 343–362.
- Stimson, James, Michael Mackuen and Robert Erikson. 1995. "Dynamic Representation". *The American Political Science Review* 89(3): 543-565.
- Van der Brug, Wouter. 2004. "Issue ownership and party choice." *Electoral Studies* 23(2): 209–233.
- Vegetti, Federico. 2014. "From political conflict to partisan evaluations: How citizens assess party ideology and competence in polarized elections." *Electoral Studies* 35: 230–241.
- Wagner, Markus. 2012. "When do parties emphasise extreme positions? How strategic incentives for policy differentiation influence issue importance." *European Journal of Political Research* 51(1): 64–88.
- Walgrave, Stefaan, Jonas Lefevere, and Anke Tresch. 2014. "The Limits of Issue Ownership Dynamics: The Constraining Effect of Party Preference." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 24(1): 1–19.