



Book Review

No Substitute for Competence. On the origins and consequences of issue ownership.

Lanz, Simon

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No Substitute for Competence by Simon Lanz (ECPR Press / Rowman & Littlefield International) presents an ambitious, comparative analysis of issue competence evaluations. It sets out to investigate three questions: what are the sources of voters' evaluations of party competence? How do evaluations of party competence influence vote choices? And to what extent does the impact of party competence on the vote vary across contexts? The book originates from Lanz' award-winning dissertation, and has a lot to offer to the reader. First, it presents a rich comparative study on issue ownership. Comparative work on issue ownership is exceedingly rare. This book presents evidence covering 24 countries, moving beyond the few Western democracies that tend to dominate the issue ownership literature (e.g. the U.S., Belgium, the Netherlands). Furthermore, it leverages the comparative design and investigates contextual variations in competence evaluations' effect on the vote. Second, in addition to offering an excellent introduction to the relevant literature in its opening chapters, Lanz breaks new ground in theorizing how contextual factors (e.g. party system fragmentation) may condition the impact of competence evaluations on the vote. Third, it evaluates the rich theoretical framework through a robust analytical strategy while still making the results accessible to a broad audience.

The structure of the book is straightforward and sensible: after the introductory chapter, chapters 2 and 3 discuss the theoretical framework; chapter 4 presents the data and methodological choices; and chapters 5 through 7 examine the determinants of competence evaluations (chapter 5), the impact of competence evaluations on the vote and individual-level moderators (chapter 6), as well as the extent to which the impact of competence on the vote varies across contexts (chapter 7). The book closes up with a brief conclusion and reflection on the limitations of the design.

The theoretical framework consists of two chapters. Chapter 2 offers an accessible introduction to rational choice models and issue ownership theory. This makes it accessible to readers that are new to the field of issue ownership. Lanz' discussion moves beyond the 'usual suspects' such as Petrocik (1996) and Budge & Farlie (1983). It includes both classic works on issue ownership such as RePass (1971) and Kuechler (1991), and contemporary insights emanating from prominent scholars in the field. For anyone unfamiliar with issue ownership, chapter 2 thus provides an excellent overview. The most interesting chapter for scholars of issue voting is chapter 3, however. Lanz presents a rich set of hypotheses regarding the sources of issue competence, its effect on the vote, and the way the latter is conditioned by micro- (ideology, partisanship) and macro-level factors (fragmentation, polarization, and clarity of responsibility). The

discussion on more macro-level determinants of issue ownership's effect on the vote breaks new ground and presents a compelling theoretical puzzle (p.33-38).

Chapter 4 discusses the methodological approach. Lanz relies on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project, which is enriched with other data sources (e.g. CMP, ParlGov). The fact that only competence evaluations on the voter's most important problem can be taken into account does have its limitations – the key limitation being that competence evaluations on issues other than the most important one cannot be accounted for in the models. Yet, the most important problem question, available in the CSES, is one of the very rare cases in which an equivalent question on issue importance and party competence has been presented to representative samples in multiple countries. Moreover, Lanz extensively addresses the drawbacks of the most important issue approach. Consequently, the drawbacks of focusing solely on parties' competence on the most important issue are adequately discussed – and the rich comparative data of the CSES enables Lanz to investigate novel comparative hypotheses. Furthermore, Lanz' analytical approach is convincing and enables a robust test of the theoretical propositions.

Chapter 5 investigates the roots of competence evaluations. The results suggest that partisanship, ideological distance and government performance evaluations are strong determinants of competence evaluations. Surprisingly, party attention does not seem to have a very robust effect, which runs counter one of the dominant assumptions in the issue ownership literature, namely that parties gain ownership by attending to issues. This leads Lanz to conclude that *“to argue that issue ownership is a tool in the parties' hands would be an overstatement in most countries”* (p.63). This aligns with Budge's view, who argued that parties are 'stuck' with their issues since their core electorate expects them to attend to them. These factors combined suggest that if issue ownership is a tool, its use is highly constrained. That said, while the findings indeed suggest that attention has – at best – an inconsistent effect on competence, the empirical design may also affect the findings. On the one hand, the focus on the most important problem may affect the findings: voters may be more informed on the most important problem, and under such circumstances, they may be more prone to see through 'window dressing' efforts of parties. On the other hand, in a context of mediated politics, manifesto data may underestimate the effect of parties' issue attention on competence perceptions: several studies suggest that party issue attention in media coverage does exert effects on competence. As such, while parties' ability to shape competence perceptions is constrained, this does not mean selective attention is wholly unfit as a tool in parties' strategic arsenal.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate the extent to which competence evaluations affect electoral choice in the 24 countries under study. Overall, the findings of chapter 6 line up well with prior research: competence evaluations affect vote choices. The book shows that this is the case in all 24 countries, and controlling for partisanship, voter-party distance, and government evaluations – key determinants of vote choice. This is where the book, in my opinion, makes a significant contribution: in contrast to the dispersed, country-specific studies that litter the field, this book demonstrates that competence consistently affects vote choices across a wide array of countries. Chapter 7 moves beyond the state of the art by investigating three contextual factors – party system fragmentation, polarization and clarity of responsibility. Only party system fragmentation seems to systematically affect the role of competence on electoral choice. This was somewhat surprising, although the focus on the most important problem may affect the findings: if voters think an issue is important, they may be more likely to seek information on party performance, reducing

the impact of the broader context on voters' ability to account for competence evaluations in their electoral choices. Lanz suggests that future research should model vote choice based on competence evaluations on several issues. Indeed, such analyses may reveal that clarity of responsibility, notably, matters after all. The theoretical argumentation is highly convincing; it is surprising that the results did not confirm it.

As with any good academic piece of work, reading Lanz' engaging analysis of issue ownership effects also raises further research questions. As indicated earlier, the comparative approach is one of the key strengths of the book, yet in its investigation of the source of issue ownership (chapter 5), several contextual variables were absent. For example, party performance has a quite consistent effect on competence evaluations, but there are important variations across countries. To what extent would factors such as the clarity of responsibility, for example, explain these variations? Lanz hints at such patterns himself, but a more systematic analysis of the contextual variables would have added further depth to the analysis. Yet, it speaks volumes to the innovativeness of the book that the reader is left pondering the many implications its findings may have for future research.

In sum, in *No Substitute for Competence*, Simon Lanz offers compelling evidence for the importance of voters' perceptions of party competence on electoral choice. The book presents one of the most comprehensive analyses of party competence to date, and moves beyond the state of the art by theorizing how variations between countries may shape the role of competence evaluations in determining electoral outcomes. It presents rich empirical evidence and a robust analytical approach to evaluate the theoretical propositions. Most importantly, it demonstrates convincingly that competence evaluations affect voting behavior above and beyond established determinants of electoral choice. Although the findings on the contextual factors are somewhat less straightforward, it also demonstrates that more (comparative) research is needed to understand the role of issue ownership in contemporary elections. As a result, *No Substitute for Competence* establishes itself as essential reading for scholars working on issue ownership and those studying electoral choice more broadly.

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