1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The State of the Literature

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

Confusion about Issue Ownership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Debates about Endogeneity

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

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

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

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

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

Valence and Competence: Valence as a Fuzzy Empirical Concept

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Valence as Everything and Nothing

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

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

[2] See also Green and Jennings 2017b.

Enelow and Hinich 1981; Bernhardt and Ingberman 1985; Austen-Smith 1987; Hinich and Munger 1989, 1995; Ingberman 1992) or simply 'the personal vote' (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000). Valence has been used to denote high levels of name recognition and goodwill among electorates (Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1977), charisma, name recognition and greater campaign funds (Kim 2005; Serra 2010), superior character or intelligence (Groseclose 2001), the skills, assets and resources that candidates need for campaigning (Serra 2011), campaign spending on advertising (Zakharov 2009), negative campaigning (Curini and Paolo Martelli 2010) and even better handshaking skills (Hollard and Rossignol 2008)! Some authors define valence as honesty and integrity (Wittman 2005), or the knowledge and reputation of a party's staff and activists (Enelow and Hinich 1982). Buechler (2008) proposes five dimensions to any candidate valence term; two associated with honesty (susceptibility to influence and personal integrity), and three associated with competence (policy expertise, legislative skill and managerial competence). From the precise to the general, valence has been defined as the variation in popularity of each candidate in the electorate (Schofield 2003), 'the candidate advantage where one candidate is more popular than the other' (Bruter et al. 2010: 157), a dimension orthogonal to policy; a non-policy attribute of candidates (Serra 2010) and a 'non-policy advantage' (Grose and Globetti 2008). We trust this list makes our point!

To the degree that this book is about 'valence' it is about the competence aspects of issues, with consideration also of how competence and position are inextricably linked, especially in issue ownership. We distinguish between policy competence and those existing variables which have an element of performance, or 'valence'. Our book examines public opinion about competence on the economy *and* on the wider set of issue domains for which survey data are available. It analyses issue competence alongside leadership evaluations, economic conditions and partisanship, but specifically distinguishes them, to isolate their dynamics, explanations and impacts. It also analyses all of these concepts alongside spatial measures of public opinion, mindful of the way in which ideological positions and evaluations interact with these concepts, not just with issue competence and ownership.

Finally, this book takes the view that 'valence' is a contextual phenomenon. We test the argument made by Stokes which was never actually tested, to our knowledge: that valence voting occurs when major events heighten the relevance of competence. This argument and evidence occurs later on in the book, in Chapter 7.

A New Approach: Three Concepts of Public Opinion about Issue Competence

We suggest there are three main kinds of public opinion about competence that matter: (i) public opinion about reputations on issues; those issues a party is considered relatively best on due to long-term representation and reputation, a party's owned issues; (ii) public opinion about how well parties-in-government are handling individual policy issues in terms of short-term fluctuations; and (iii) public opinion about how parties and governments are judged overall in terms of competence on issues; or 'generalised competence'. The three concepts we put forward here are not all new. They represent a new reading of the insights of the existing literature on issue ownership, performance and valence, which is reviewed and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. The need for these three separate concepts becomes evident when considering the following scenario.

Imagine a president or a party presiding over a succession of high, low and then high numbers of military casualties of war over a period of months. Public opinion about the incumbent's handling of war will fluctuate. However, it is not obvious that the president's party or governing party will lose a long-term reputation as being more trusted on the issue of defence. It is also not obvious that this over-time variation in policy handling and outcomes will result in an indictment of the administration overall. Nevertheless, the individual-level variation in an evaluation of a government's handling of casualties of war will be tremendously important. Regions or electoral districts with high military populations may weigh military casualties more heavily than others. Doves may weigh them more heavily than hawks. The over-time variation in the importance of war – and the public salience of military casualties – will be important for variation in presidential approval and in electoral preferences. The party may retain its 'issue ownership' of the issues of foreign affairs and defence, but meaningful volatility in public opinion can still exert an impact on the governing party's approval.

Imagine now that our president or incumbent also presides over a major scandal in public spending. Perhaps a high-profile resignation occurs and major political figures begin to apportion blame in conflicting directions, leading to questions of unity and party control. Media and opposition party attention detects the government is in trouble, seizes on that opportunity and public awareness grows. These kinds of difficult political periods happen frequently. Yet the two concepts which are commonly applied to understanding public opinion about competence, that of the relatively stable reputations

different parties have on issues and short-term policy handling on specific policy issues, would not explain this ebb and flow of positive and negative party competence. A government that has lost public trust will lose public trust across the policy agenda. 'A rising tide lifts all boats' (and an outgoing tide lowers all boats). We need a concept of issue competence that is general, capturing overall gains and losses in perceived party and government policy competence over time. And we need a concept of policy evaluations on specific issues and a concept of issue-specific advantages that parties tend to carry over time. Sometimes those short-term evaluations may indeed alter issue ownership, but we do not know how frequently this occurs, if it does, or the conditions that make this more or less likely. These are questions we take up in Chapter 4.

The three concepts we argue for are as follows:

(i) Long-term Reputations: *Issue Ownership*

For a party to gain 'ownership' of an issue, it should be closer to the preferences of a particular issue public that cares about this issue, it should take (or have taken) a greater interest in the issue than another party and it should be recognised as the party most likely to handle the issue well and deliver on it. This reputation and issue-association is faithful to Petrocik's (1996) definition of 'party-constituency issue ownership' based upon long-term constituency representation. We know that parties are better trusted on some issues compared to others due to reputations they come to hold over a long time period. These reputations tend to be relatively stable (although how much is questionable) and lead the average rating of a party on an 'owned' issue to be higher than its rating on other issues, and higher than those of another party.

(ii) Variation in Issue-Specific Handling: *Policy Performance*

Every party-in-government may be judged more positively on its handling of an issue (perhaps because a policy statement is made which voters agree with, or a positive outcome is noticed or felt by voters) and it may be judged more negatively on its handling of an issue (due to deteriorating policy outcomes, or a successful criticism by a non-partisan group, or a party's rivals). We recognise the positional and performance nature of judgements about handling and competence. These short-term changes are not the same as issue ownership; they do not denote a long-term reputational advantage, and they can exhibit meaningful variation on an owned issue and meaningful variation on other issues as well.

(iii) General Evaluations about Party Competence: *Generalised Competence*

The third concept relates to the generalised way in which parties and governments come to be rated more positively or negatively – on average – on all policy issues. If a party is rated more positively across the policy agenda, its owned issues will still remain better rated than others, but the mean evaluation of the party will be higher overall. There may still be important issue-specific variance, as parties are judged better or worse on individual issues. But the general mood of an electorate about the party-in-government (or a party-in-opposition) will exhibit meaningful variation in its average rating across issues.

The concepts are represented in the following graph. Figure 1.1 depicts the issue handling ratings of a fictional party on seven issues over time; the economy, healthcare, education, foreign affairs, transport, immigration and the environment. The ratings on the y-axis indicate the percentage of the public who consider the party as best able to handle a given issue.[3]

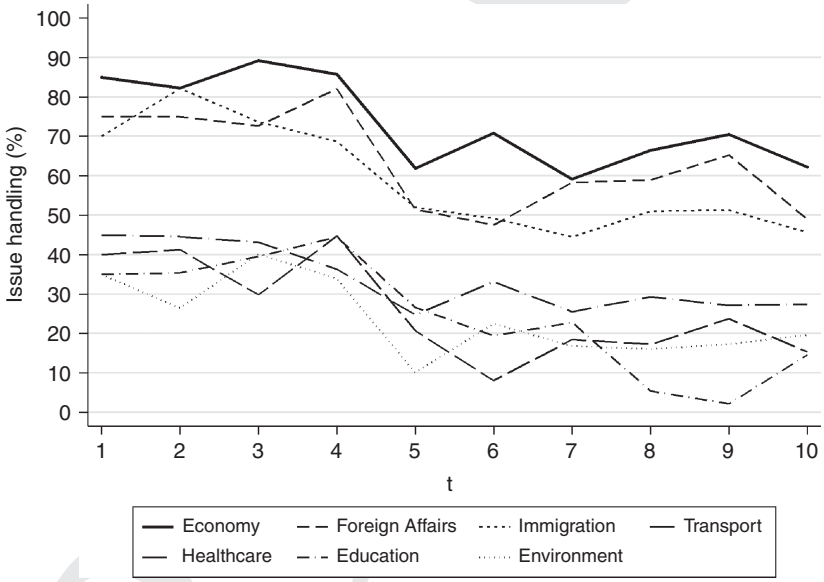

Figure 1.1 Issue handling reputations of a fictional party on seven issues

[3] These fictional data were created by first setting the intercept of each issue at a different level, to indicate its underlying relative strength or weakness for the party (these values ranged from 25 to 85). We then added random noise to each series

Each line exhibits issue-specific variation. As voters recognise changes in the state of the health system, or the number of immigrants, or economic growth, they ascribe more positive or more negative evaluations to the party in question. However, this party always tends to be more trusted on the issues of the economy, foreign affairs and immigration (we would assume our fictional party is a right-of-centre party). Whilst those issues exhibit fluctuation, the mean level of these evaluations tends to be higher. Finally, our fictional party suffers a shock to its competence evaluations in year five. From this point, the average competence evaluation on all issues experiences a negative shock. While the party still retains relative ownership of 'its' issues, and while there continues to be issue-specific variation in perceived handling and performance, there is an overarching loss of competence in public opinion we would need to explain. Each feature of public opinion may have an independent consequence.

We see large competence shocks as a type of performance effect. In this sense, performance can be a cause of ownership loss (or gain).[4] In Figure 1.1 there is a shock at year 5. Here there is no change in 'ownership'; the same issues are more (and less) positive for our fictional party, just less so across the issue agenda. A major performance shock could, however, alter ownership of an issue, which we theorise in detail in Chapter 4. Importantly, shocks in performance can have an independent effect, resulting in a change in party handling on one issue, they can result in a deterioration (or improvement) in generalised competence across all issues, and they can also, under certain conditions, impact on a party's ownership of an issue.

These fictional phenomena are based on trends we observe in a wealth of aggregate-level survey data on public opinion that we have collected in five countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany. The level differences (ownership), fluctuations (performance) and average competence declines and increases (generalised competence) are found in all five countries, where traditions of over-time opinion polling make these analyses possible.

from a normal distribution with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 6 (this value was somewhat arbitrarily chosen, but importantly was intended to be greater than might be expected from sampling error alone). Finally, we subtracted 20 points from each series in year 5 and all subsequent years, to capture the lasting drop in competence evaluations. This can be represented as: $P_i = a_{0i} - k_{t\geq5} + e_t$ where *i* is the issue, k is the effect of an external shock at t=5 … t=n, and e is the random noise component.

[4] Whether it results in a temporary 'lease' or realignment of an issue for one party or another (to a new equilibrium) is an empirical question we address in Chapter 4.

Puzzles in Political Science

The clarification of concepts makes it possible to tackle new theoretical questions.

How stable is 'Long-Term Ownership', and What Explains Changes in Issue Ownership?

We know very little about where ownership comes from, or what explains variation in a party's reputations on different issues. The latter puzzle may have arisen because scholars have assumed long-term ownership to be invariant. We show that this is not the case. Using a conservative measure of ownership change, which makes it difficult for us to find substantial movement in parties' relative issue reputations, we reveal frequent and long-lasting changes in issue reputations, even on issues which might be thought of as classic issues of parties on the left, and issues of parties on the right. Taking a long time frame is key here. Taking a narrower one binds us into assumptions rooted in a particular period. We provide a theory and evidence to understand and explain the causes of issue ownership change and in its absence the causes of stability. This addresses a significant gap in the literature and has implications for parties' electoral fortunes, and their strategies. Our response appears in Chapter 4.

Does Policy Performance Matter, and If so, for Which Parties?

It may be assumed that voters and electorates notice government performance on a range of issues, but to what extent is this actually the case? It may alternatively be true that the economy is a 'super issue', but that attention on other issues is less intense. If that were the case, governments may have a license to govern poorly on non-economic policy issues. If voters notice government performance, however, across policy issues, there are stronger potential accountability mechanisms at work. One of the classic folk theories in politics is that oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them. To what extent are opposition parties the beneficiaries of performance ratings of governments in terms of (a) enhanced evaluations of their own performance capabilities, and (b) the consequences of performance ratings on party choice? These are the questions we address in Chapter 5.

Why Do Governing Parties Regularly Lose Support?

The concept of generalised competence, and its estimation at the aggregate level, offers an over-time measure of subjective evaluations

of parties on competence. This has been the 'missing link' in efforts to explain the phenomenon of declining levels of support for parties over a period in office. Why do governments so regularly appear to lose public support over a period in office? Why does blame seem to be more acute towards the end of a period in government, but less severe at the beginning? We account for these time-based trends in a theoretical and empirical manner, moving beyond offering an ad-hoc explanation for their existence. In Chapter 6 we present a theory and evidence, building on the implications of the idea of 'grievance asymmetry' (Nannestad and Paldam 2002), that take us closer to an answer of why parties in government so regularly experience costs of ruling.

How and When Does Competence Matter in Elections?

Political parties have incentives to prime competence and incentives to avoid it, and will sometimes be successful and sometimes less so. The exogenous environment will make some issues – and some evaluations – important in such a way that it would be strange to think that it is parties alone that can shape, prime or frame the political agenda, or even do any more than to respond to it (see Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). It is important to ask, therefore: when is competence more important to party support, and when is it not? What factors shape the relevance of competence, and which are less likely to do so? Is the effect of competence (ownership, performance and generalised competence) constant, or are there systematic predictors of a stronger and weaker association over time? These questions are central to understanding when – and under what conditions – scholars should focus more on a competence explanation of vote choices (and party competition) and when they should focus more on other factors. We provide our answers to those questions in Chapter 7.

How Much Agency do Parties and Governments Have?

It is often assumed that parties and governments are the shapers of politics. Politics is, after all, the art of the exercise of power. Our book has implications for a fundamental question of how much parties and governments are actually responding to the broader political and policy environment over which they have limited immediate control. We put forward a range of ways in which parties are the principals, rather than the agents, of public opinion about competence and when public opinion about competence matters.

One reading of issue ownership theory is that parties are able to influence the issues that decide elections. Parties are also expected to enhance their reputations on policy issues via their commitment to those issues, to electoral constituencies and via attention to issues in office. Spatial models assume that parties compete strategically by adjusting their policy offerings to voters. Riker's (1986) theory of heresthetics, for example, assumes that governments can shape the dimensions on which competition is based, not just at election time, but also between elections. Governments use their power to establish legislative priorities and to determine the direction of policies. To some degree, we see a strategic element to changes in issue ownership. In Chapter 4 we detail the positional strategies that coincide with changes to party reputations on issues. However, with every change in issue ownership we identify a major 'shock' in performance or competence, and many of these shocks are exogenous. There are periodically major events in political life – landmark policies, economic crises, policy failures, military campaigns, corruption scandals, changes of leadership. Those events are drivers of public opinion about parties, and they shape their decisions and strategies. While not always exogenous, they often are, and they have a major impact on electorates and their opinions. They shape the dynamics of public opinion about competence.

We analyse the degree to which evaluations of government issue handling are products of policy performance. Not all policy performance is a strategic response. It can also be driven by events. Our focus on the 'costs of governing' phenomena also points to a pattern of governing party support that is so regular and predictable that it begs the question of whether and under what conditions governments can ever strategically buck the trend of declining support over their time in office. When analysing the impact of events and shocks on competence voting, we find a consistent pattern that it is these 'exogenous' shocks which determine the importance of issue ownership, performance and generalised competence for explaining electoral choice.

Our book does not claim that parties and governments have no control over their reputations, over the issue agenda or over the basis of what matters in elections. Our findings do, however, strongly challenge the extent to which this is always true, or should always be a guiding assumption of political strategies. This calls for a re-focusing of attention on the degree to which parties and governments, their strategies, emphases and priorities, are responders to their environment, rather than the architects of it. We stress the limits of political power in shaping public opinion, and the power of public opinion in shaping politics.

Our Analytic Approach

The aim of this book is to assess long-term factors in public opinion, the importance of political context, government cycles, events, major policy changes, performance shocks and the interrelationship between public opinion and the exogenous policy environment, and with partisanship. Our approach is therefore to assess variation over time, across parties, periods of government, countries and policy issues. We briefly highlight the value of this approach.

Over Time

An explanatory model of the effects of issues, the economy, leaders, ideological preferences, indeed of any variable, can rarely – if ever – be generalised across all elections. 'We should explore longer time series where possible and not assume that our contemporary context reflects a constant' (Brasher 2009: 74). The context in which an election is fought can fundamentally alter the salience and relevance of any one or more explanatory factor(s). The economy will matter more to electoral choice when economic conditions are negative rather than positive (Paldam 1991; Soroka 2006, 2014), or when the proportions of partisans in the electorate are low (Kayser and Wlezien 2011). Ideology will matter more to electoral outcomes when parties and voters are divided on issues than when politics is consensual (Stokes 1963; Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008). Such a focus upon context is particularly important when considering the consequences of competence. Voters are more likely to make a vote choice based upon competence when things are going badly than when they are going well. This is something we consider in various chapters in this volume, finding support for negativity bias in public opinion and its effects (see Nannestad and Paldam 2002; Soroka 2006, 2014).

The time dimension is crucial if we are to separate institutional variation from party alternation, or to compare the effects of significant policy events, or to analyse the decline (or incline) of competence ratings for governments across electoral cycles. We need variation on periods in which parties are responsible for handling public policy issues and when they are not; when they form governments and when they are in opposition.

Across Country Context and Institutional Differences

We present data on the largest number of countries possible for each theoretical question considered. Where we can address a question using

survey data on vote intention, we present our analysis for 31 countries over 116 periods of government. Where we can answer a theoretical question using our time-series measure of generalised competence, we analyse its dynamics in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany. These countries are those in which sufficient traditions in opinion polling and national election studies make possible the collection of sufficient data for reliable time series analysis.

In some of our analyses, the need for equivalent covariates means we focus more closely on the United States and the United Kingdom. Here we have aggregate-level measures of partisanship, public policy mood, presidential or prime ministerial approval, trust in government, economic evaluations and other indicators, and also salient events. These countries also give us individual level data that are comparable for our purposes. The in-depth analysis of two countries; one presidential and one parliamentary, one with a clear tradition of strongly partisan two-party politics and one having experienced a period of partisan dealignment and party system fragmentation (see Green and Prosser 2016), means that we can provide as much evidence as possible to give greater confidence that our findings are generalizable, and not confined to a single country.

Aggregate and Individual Level

Much of the focus in this book considers the dynamic nature of aggregate-level public opinion as part of our understanding of the macro-polity. We are careful to develop theories of electorates rather than of individual voters when we test our research questions at the macro-level. Our research questions concern how parties respond to the long-term and general nature of public opinion: how they are rated on average and in general, one issue to another, rather than within segments of the electorate. This in no way implies that parties and individual politicians are not eagerly aware of the segmentation and heterogeneity of the electorate, and will not target their campaigns and messages to these different groups. Yet the priorities of a government are national, and the outcome of an election is governed by the aggregation of a myriad of electoral concerns. Our conceptual development of the three concepts of competence uses both individual and aggregate data in the United States and United Kingdom, where comparable questions are asked. When we develop a combined model of vote choice in Chapter 7, we demonstrate the implications using aggregate-level data, as well as individual-level data.

We combine a wealth of quantitative evidence together with in-depth qualitative analysis of cases. In Chapter 4 we present a comparative analysis of cases of issue ownership change drawing on extensive exploration of a range of contextual data in the histories of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany, and also of issue ownership stability.

Implications and Applications

This book tackles questions including but also moving beyond a focus upon elections.

Understanding Party Competition

Average issue handling ratings of parties confuse three concepts, as highlighted earlier: the relative strengths of a party on a given issue in relation to strengths on other issues; the way in which evaluations of parties fluctuate on individual issues; and the general direction in public opinion about competence which causes those issue handling ratings to increase together and decrease together. These insights have different implications for the issue-based competitive strategies of candidates and parties.

The first implication is that issue ownership effects might be better understood by thinking of different kinds of advantages across concepts. For example, a party may have a positive rating on the issue of healthcare, and that issue may be its 'best' issue over time. Even a loss of positive ratings on healthcare would result in that issue remaining the 'best' among all issues, and an issue on which the party retains a lead over its opponent, even if narrow. But another issue – law and order – may have become more positive for the party, perhaps due to falling crime levels, investment in policing and so on. This may not be an 'owned' issue in the sense that it is consistently positive for the party over time, but the issue becomes positive for a relevant electoral period. Here a focus on the relative ratings of the party on an issue would denote a campaign focus on crime. Instances where parties and candidates do not appear to campaign on their 'owned' issues might therefore be explained by the party's relatively positive ratings in the shorter term. Allowing for this variance in relative issue evaluations may lead to greater explanatory power.

The concept of generalised competence reveals how parties face different strategic contexts according to their popularity and public confidence, and it serves as a contextual variable. In periods when parties are more trusted on a range of policy issues, their issue agenda might be broader. Such contexts may be characterised by a stronger

focus on competence, trust, handling and delivery, whereas alternative foci in periods of competence losses might be on a limited number of issues, on positional advantages, on uncertainty and risk over the competence of an alternative government, and perhaps more negative campaigning. When a government lacks strong generalised competence, we can expect the rival party's attention, and the attention of the media, to be strongly focused on competence. These are empirical questions beyond the scope of this book, but they are hypotheses which can be tested in light of it.

Scholars have tackled a range of questions concerning the relationship of a valence advantage or disadvantage to the moderate or extreme positions of candidates and parties. Those implications may be evaluated according to individual policy issues, both in terms of change in ratings and in terms of relative issue-based strengths, and in relation to the more positive or negative context in which candidates and parties compete.

Understanding Electoral Choice

There is a growing body of scholarship revealing how competence evaluations have an important and influential effect upon vote choice. However, the effects of competence have not been widely or consistently estimated. One reason for this is the absence of consistent and comparative measures. The opinion polling industry has been far more focused upon issue handling variation over time than the electoral studies community, and so have candidates and political parties themselves – clues, of course, to the strategic importance of analysing public opinion about the competence of candidates and parties on issues. This book highlights the importance of issue competence effects by demonstrating the nature of variance in public opinion about issue competence, and by delineating the concepts which explain unique variance in vote choice models. Crucially, we reveal that competence effects are not constant; they vary in response to the political relevance of competence following different exogenous and political events, and matter in some elections more than others.

The concept of generalised competence offers a way to explain a variety of electoral questions. Does ideology matter more to vote choices when party competence is higher, or lower? Do voters use competence as a heuristic more under contexts of stronger partisan conditions or in contexts of partisan dealignment? Does the ideological blurring common in Western party democracies strengthen the influence of competence (see Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008), or is competence more important within the polarised politics of countries such as America? Does

competence matter more in times of crisis and upheaval? These questions, and more, can be answered and further investigated in future work using over-time and comparative measures of competence made available and described in this book.

Understanding the Macro-Polity

This book makes a contribution to the broader understanding of the macro-polity via two substantive implications of competence evaluations at the macro-level. We reveal how variation in generalised competence explains aggregate-level changes in voting preferences, and how variation in generalised competence explains the comparative evidence of losses in electoral support for parties over a period in government.

The measurement of generalised competence ('macro-competence') can be applied to the analysis of the macro-polity more widely. It will be possible to further address the question of whether macro-partisanship is a running tally of these evaluations. Researchers, using our measure, will be able to assess how different presidents and prime ministers contribute to, and benefit from (or are harmed by), the competence evaluations of their parties. We can calculate the impact of major political events, of leader evaluations and partisan attachments and the effects of generalised competence on electoral preferences over time (see Green and Jennings 2012a). Realigning elections may exist for competence, as well as for partisanship, such that shocks to competence have a long-lasting and fundamentally important effect upon political evaluations in some elections, but a lesser effect in others. There may also be fascinating interrelationships between generalised competence evaluations and the loss of relative issue reputations which affect issue ownership.

Public Policy Processes and Outcomes

There is little question that the quality of government – its effectiveness, management and policy outcome successes and their measurement – has enormous implications for public policy and public management. The performance and competence of governments, through perception and reality, will impact upon public management reform, priorities and actions.

Our contribution in this area is to better understand the nature of electoral responsiveness to government performance, and to reveal how public opinion responds to a government over time. As governments lose a reputation for competence over a period in office, the incentives for performing better may become stronger, or they may weaken. An

important puzzle will be resolving the likelihood that administrations do better over a period in office (Dewan and Myatt 2012) and the reality of the regularity of decline in public perceptions. We can imagine a vicious circle, whereby a loss in reputation for competence leads to factionalism and disunity, with different factions apportioning blame and proposing competing solutions. It is therefore of interest to explore whether performance incentives within administrations are influenced by the responsiveness of the public to different issues.

The literature on risk and blame management suggests that policymakers have enhanced incentives to avoid blame (Hood 2002, 2011). Our work confirms the presence of a negativity bias in competence effects upon vote choices. As argued by Weaver (1986), politicians may tend to be more blame averse than they are credit-seeking. Obtaining measures of policy competence – and doing so for issues in addition to the economy – provides an insight into the degree to which the public is attentive and responsive to policy performance across a range of policy issues. This can have a range of implications for theories of blame avoidance. While theories assume that delegated policy areas result in less blame attribution to national governments, the consistency of responsiveness to policy performance points to a more complex model in which these strategies are either unsuccessful or the beliefs of their potential success are misguided.

The implications and applications represent literatures which have thus far been unconnected. None have hitherto been able to draw upon a systematic understanding of how competence reputations are won and lost, how voters formulate opinions about party competence, how they differ by incumbents and oppositions and the degree to which they are stable over time. We actually know relatively little about public opinion regarding competence. This book bridges this gap.

Book Outline

The remainder of the book is organised as follows.

Chapter 2 argues for the three concepts of competence, drawing on a re-reading of Petrocik's definitions of issue ownership and reflecting on the wider literature about reputations, ownership, valence issues and competence. It outlines the concepts, how we operationalise them and how we measure them.

Chapter 3 offers an empirical validation of the concepts using the broadest range of public opinion data available, illustrating similarities and differences in our country cases; the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Germany. For each concept we systematically

explore the relationship with partisanship, revealing the degree to which the concepts are not coterminous and offering insights into how partisanship relates to competence.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 each take one of the concepts of competence and explore new theoretical implications and explanations.

Chapter 4 analyses cases of issue reputation losses and gains. We put forward a theory to explain why parties gain and lose ownership of issues. The theory is based on symbolic politics; those policy changes and performance signals which reshape partisan evaluations and alter the make-up of partisan constituencies, subject to the necessary conditions of salience and party supply. Cases are drawn from four countries and the theory is evaluated against a range of primary empirical data and secondary sources.

Chapter 5 analyses the nature and implications of short-term evaluations of performance. Taking the assumption that short-term fluctuations arise mainly from the actions of the government, this chapter examines the association between policy outcomes and indicators and fluctuations in public evaluations of government performance on issues. It evaluates the responsiveness of public evaluations of policy performance on ratings of the party-in-power and the main opposition party, exhibiting asymmetry in the degree of responsiveness and change. Finally, the chapter examines how performance evaluations exert a similar effect on governing and opposition vote choices.

Chapter 6 reveals how electorates come to evaluate a party more negatively for its competence the longer it governs. There is a degree to which generalised competence evaluations are cyclical and behave in similar ways to declines in governing party support. These cycles offer an explanation for incumbent vote losses – the 'costs of ruling' or 'costs of governing', allowing for their relationship with partisanship, leader approval and the economy. We put forward a time-varying theory of blame attribution, revealing how honeymoon periods arise from the discounting of new incumbent performance, how negative shocks to competence evaluations are more heavily weighted and how they accumulate against a government over its period of office, up to a saturation point beyond which accumulation effects weaken.

In Chapter 7 we integrate the three concepts to reveal how each provides explanatory power when analysing electoral choice. Controlling for partisanship and other variables, we demonstrate the effects of a combined competence model of vote choice, at both the aggregate and individual level. We also reveal how competence effects are contextual; much less than offering a constant explanation over time, the effects of ownership, performance and generalised competence vary in

systematic ways following performance shocks and events, and elections in which competence is particularly salient.

Chapter 8 considers the findings and the implications of issue competence as issue ownership, performance and generalised competence, and directions for future research.

Conclusion

The study of issue competence has been concerned with its influence on vote choices when parties' owned issues are salient in elections, and with understanding the basis of party competition. Scholars have debated the degree to which issue ownership is stable and whether ownership is therefore a long-term asset of a party, or whether this asset is more temporary. Alongside these debates, the literature on performance, competence and 'valence' has been muddled. It has lacked precise definitions and agreements on what is – and what is not – ownership or competence.

In this book we differentiate between issue ownership, performance and generalised evaluations of competence. We focus on the mass-level characteristics of public opinion about competence to (i) clarify the concepts and measures of issue competence, (ii) analyse the relationships between public opinion about competence and partisanship and (iii) open up new lines of analysis to tackle important theoretical and empirical questions. The remainder of this book delves into those questions and provides our answers. Before doing so, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on competence, clarifying the concepts and gaps, offering a solution, and Chapter 3 examines the construct validity of our three concepts of ownership, performance and generalised competence.