

ISSUE OWNERSHIP THEORY: A PERFORMANCE-SIDE ANALYSIS

A Thesis  
by  
JEFFERY CHARLES MARTIN

Submitted to the Graduate School  
at Appalachian State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

August 2013  
Department of Government and Justice Studies

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APPROVED BY:

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Philip J. Ardoin  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Craig M. Burnett  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Todd K. Hartman  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Brian A. Ellison  
Chairperson, Department of Government and Justice Studies

---

Edelma D. Huntley  
Dean, Cratis Williams Graduate School

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## **Abstract**

### **ISSUE OWNERSHIP THEORY: A PERFORMANCE-SIDE ANALYSIS**

Jeffery Charles Martin  
B.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Philip J. Ardoin

As originally noted by Petrocik (1996), presidential candidates are generally more successful when campaigning on the issues that their party owns. Specifically, if the public consistently perceives that one party can handle an issue area better than the other party, then the party and its candidates gain the trust of the public and own the issue area. While numerous scholars have examined the impact of Petrocik's issue ownership theory on candidates' electoral success, scholars have not applied the central tenets of the theory to what presidents actually do after being elected. With this in mind, this project develops and tests a multivariate performance-side analysis of presidential success. Specifically, I examine whether presidents are more successful in issue areas which that party owns.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee chairperson, Dr. Philip Ardoin, whose guidance made this possible, and the willingness of the other committee members, Dr. Craig Burnett and Dr. Todd Hartman, to offer their support. Second, I would like to thank the graduate faculty in the Department of Government and Justice Studies for awarding me the Richter Moore Graduate Fellowship, which allowed me to present my thesis to the attendees of the Midwest Political Science Association Conference. And a tremendous thanks to the family and friends whose support kept me focused on my educational goals and the path of self-improvement, a path which is far from over.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my family and friends for their continued support as I pursue my educational goals. To my mother, who is always supportive in everything I do. She is the rock that has always managed to help me whenever I needed it. To my friends, who encouraged me to return to school and go for something I love to do.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 2012 election, each presidential campaign established a series of messages that they conveyed to the voters through the media. In campaign commercials and televised debates, both presidential candidates reiterated time and time again disparate messages. Democratic President Barack Obama pushed an agenda to support education, the middle class, and the protection of Social Security and Medicare. Meanwhile, Republican challenger Mitt Romney pushed an agenda for reduced spending and regulation, tax cuts, and increased defense spending (Museum of the Moving Image 2012; CNN Politics 2012). This is not an unusual tactic for either side to pursue during the campaign season, but what can help explain this tendency for the political parties to discuss these same respective issues time and time again?

### ***The Background: Issue Ownership Theory***

Issue ownership theory, as defined by John Petrocik (1996, 826), states that “a campaign effect exists when a candidate successfully frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to handle than his opponent.” He further narrows the scope of this theory by explaining what he means by the word *handle*. Petrocik proposes that due to historical reputation, attention, initiative, and

innovation in particular policy areas, one of the major parties will have the trust of the voters to handle specific issues.

While numerous scholars have tested Petrocik's issue ownership theory with regard to elections, this research develops and tests a performance-side analysis of the issue ownership theory. The performance-side theory of issue ownership is based on the presidents' ability to achieve legislative success in policy areas in which their party has the trust of the voters as defined by Petrocik. Trust of the voters means at least a plurality of voters will side with one party over the other on a consistent basis on a given issue; otherwise, neither party has ownership over the policy area (Petrocik 1996). In Petrocik's theory, consistency is key to determining trust since it appears absolutely necessary in order to establish a reputation and dominance in a policy area. In addition, any lack of consistency in the trust of a policy area would mean neither party owns the issue.

### ***Developing a Performance-Side Theory to Issue Ownership***

As Richard Neustadt (1964) points out, the founding fathers created a system not based solely on the separation of powers among the three political branches but they also created a system of sharing powers. Separate institutions sharing powers is the idea that one branch cannot get done what it pleases without some form of cooperation from another branch. This is where much of the relevant action takes place for the performance-side theory of issue ownership, the interaction between the president and the Congress. Elected officials in these positions must contend with each other even if it is not directly involving the specific power that is shared between them. Normally, neither house of Congress considers legislation with zero chance of passing through Congress and being signed by the

president or without knowing they may have the votes to override a veto. Therefore, they must keep an eye on the expected opinion of the president, whether through public appeals (Barrett 2005; Canes-Wrone 2001; Canes-Wrone 2004; Kernell 2006; Lee 2008), veto threats (Cameron 2000; Conley 2003; Deen and Arnold 2002), responding to public opinion (Canes-Wrone 2001; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Edwards III 1989; Edwards III 2009; Edwards III and Wood 1999; Murray 2006), or the combination of more than one of these strategies (Edwards III 1980; Beckmann 2010; Skowronek 2011). Regardless of the strategy used by the president, the end result is at the center of presidential legislative success.<sup>1</sup> Neustadt's observations on American political institutions sharing power plays a key role in analyzing issue ownership theory with presidential legislative success. After all, presidential legislative success is determined by the ability of two separate institutions sharing powers to cooperate with the intent of legislation becoming law.

In this study, the main focus is on legislation that reaches the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives for a roll-call vote on which the president has taken a position. Presidents reveal their position on roll-call votes in the hopes to persuade those in Congress to follow suit, whether it is for or against passage. This focus on roll-call votes, therefore, excludes executive orders, legislation that fails to make it out of committee, and non-legislative tasks such as court appointments. First, executive orders do not involve Congress' input. Second, it is too difficult to find reliable information on proposed legislation in committee to analyze effectively. Third, non-legislative tasks do not fit in with the aspects of legislative success in particular policy areas.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*, Lynn Vavreck discusses that issue ownership may be less relevant than just a basic advantage at a particular time, but she concentrates on the economy, which Petrocik describes as an issue not owned by either party. It is a performance-based issue that is reliant on current performance thus Petrocik appears to agree with Vavreck as far as the issue of the economy is concerned.

Petrocik's (1996) observations on what issues the parties own is the basis for comparison in this study. According to Petrocik, the Democratic Party owns the issues of social welfare, civil rights and liberties, social class comparisons, farm and agriculture, and labor. Republicans own the issues of civil and social order, military and defense, and big government (Table 1). Given these breakdowns of the policy areas with issue ownership theory, the expectation for the performance-side analysis is that Democratic and Republican presidents should have greater legislative success with issue areas which their party own. Petrocik (1996) determined that all other issues not mentioned above are not owned by either party or they are considered performance-based. Performance-based issues are in the moment; how are the parties performing on the issue at the time? In contrast to issue ownership, performance-based issues have no connection to consistency or past reputation.

**Table 1.** *Party Ownership of Issues as Determined by Petrocik*

| Political Party  | Issues Owned   |
|------------------|--|
| Democratic Party | Civil Rights and Liberties<br>Social Welfare<br>Agriculture and Farming<br>Social Class Comparisons<br>Labor |
| Republican Party | Civil and Social Order<br>Military and Defense Policy and Spending<br>Big Government                         |

This study will attempt, through this application of the issue ownership theory, to show whether there is a positive correlation between presidential legislative success and the issues the president's party owns. In the following pages, this research project will review the relevant literature in presidential legislative success and issue ownership theory. Following the literature review, the study will review the data and methods used for analysis, followed

by the results and a discussion on the implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Issue Ownership Applications*

Issue ownership theory is the idea that political parties have the trust of the public on particular issue areas based on past performance in the issue area. Issue ownership is any issue consistently owned by one of the parties. The ownership of the issue is when the voters trust one party over the other on the issue, and the voters are skeptical when the other party tries to use the issue to their benefit. These issues, as stated earlier, include civil rights and liberties, farm and agriculture, social class comparisons, labor, and social welfare, which are owned by the Democratic Party, while civil and social order, military defense policies, and big government are owned by the Republican Party. Considering the ownership of these issues, Petrocik (1996) found candidates for office were more likely to campaign successfully on the issues their party owns than the issues they do not own.

In his classic work “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study,” Petrocik (1996) discovered strong evidence for his theory. He found presidential candidates do indeed campaign on issues their party owns. The reason candidates do this is to increase their chances of getting elected or reelected. This logically implies that the electorate is most likely to vote for candidates who emphasize the issues that their party owns



and have the trust of the electorate. Since Petrocik's initial introduction of the issue ownership theory, many scholars have examined his theory in various applications.

Originally applied solely to presidential elections, issue ownership was shown to be quite persuasive; it showed a strong positive correlation between whom the electorate trusts on an issue area and what candidates for election would communicate to the public (Benoit and Hansen 2004; Damore 2005; Doherty 2008; Hayes 2008; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Sellers 1998). Extending the theory to Congress, many scholars found supportive evidence that party ownership of issue areas signaled what the candidate for Congress would espouse to the electorate (Abbe et al. 2003; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Benoit and Airne 2005; Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2009). Notably, Abbe et al. (2003) find independents are greatly affected by congressional candidates using the issues their party owns to garner support.

Of course, this does not mean a candidate will not cross over and try to usurp the dominance of the other candidate's party on an issue area. When issue trespassing occurs, it is the result of factors that are normally temporary and framed in relation to the issues they do own (Damore 2004; Goble and Holm 2009; Holian 2004; Norpoth and Buchanan 1992; Sides 2006). Pope and Woon (2009) find when there is a successful long-term trespass, it is most likely the result of a political realignment where the trespass becomes permanent and the political landscape changes overall. Therefore, the issue is taken over by the other party.

### ***Examining Legislative Success***

Since the idea here is to measure the probability issue ownership will affect a president's legislative success, we must turn to the congressional literature, which offers

substantial information on what other variables have contributed to legislative success. These factors include the rally 'round the flag effect, the honeymoon period, presidential approval, the party composition of the Congress, and issue saliency.

The rally 'round the flag effect is based on the theory that when a disaster occurs in the country or to the country, voters and Congress are more willing to cooperate with the president on legislation. This normally includes military actions, given the characteristics needed for the rally to take hold. As noted by John E. Mueller (1970), the rally 'round the flag effect typically requires the president to be at the center of the crisis and, as Commander in Chief of the military, he is naturally at the center of any military actions. Building on Mueller's initial work on this topic, several scholars have noted the rally 'round the flag effect can help the president achieve legislative success, but it requires bipartisan support, media coverage, and effective White House spin (Cohen 1982; Nacos 1994; Baker and O'Neal 2001). Moreover, Groeling and Baum (2008), Kernell (1978) and Moore (2001) have found in their research that rallies exist but they are short-lived; they tend to last a month.

The presidential honeymoon is the time period at the beginning of a presidential term when voters give a new president the benefit of the doubt and Congress is typically more willing to pass presidential legislation (Baum 2002). Eshbaugh-Soha (2010b), Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger (1998), and Halpert (1991) seem to agree in the length of time a honeymoon typically lasts: one year. Therefore, the very first year of a presidential term is considered the entire time frame of the honeymoon.

Research regarding the existence of a honeymoon period for a president yields inconsistent conclusions. However, the general consensus in the literature is that a

honeymoon period does offer the president a slightly higher probability of passing his preferred legislation in Congress (Beckmann and Godfrey 2007; Eshbaugh-Soha 2010b; Halpert 1991; Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger 1998). Challenging these findings, Eshbaugh-Soha (2010b) argues the honeymoon effect occurs only with major legislation. Moreover, Halpert (1991) contends that the honeymoon only exists during the beginning of the first term, but his conclusions are based on one president, Ronald Reagan; therefore, his findings may not apply to others. Finally, Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger (1998) claim the honeymoon period benefits the president with legislative proposals through the House of Representatives.

The presidential honeymoon may not yield greater presidential legislative success without another factor present such as the electoral results of the election; did the new president win barely or by a considerable amount? When a candidate wins by a considerable amount, it is often called a *mandate*. Numerous scholars have found that mandate elections help improve the president's chances of passing favorable legislation (Beckmann and Godfrey 2007; Conley 2002; Grossback, Peterson, and Stimson 2007; Peterson et al. 2003). The presidential mandate alone may not be sufficient. Frensdreis, Tatalovich, and Schaff (2001) say economic calamity and an increase in the number of seats obtained by the same party of the newly elected president may need to be present. This gives credence to the often quoted idea that elections have consequences. In contrast, some scholars find no connection between honeymoons and presidential legislative success (Shull 1983; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Neustadt 2001). Neustadt, specifically, claims the honeymoon is spurious; he claims a new president usually enjoys high public approval in the beginning that garners him some preferred legislation from Congress.

In relation to Neustadt's claims, one of the most analyzed connections in regard to presidential legislative success is presidential approval. Some scholars provide evidence for a direct positive link between presidents' approval and their legislative success (Ostrom and Simon 1985; Rivers and Rose 1985; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Edwards III 1997b). More specifically, Eshbaugh-Soha (2010b) claims presidential approval only has a positive effect in incremental policies, not major policy changes. Like honeymoons, presidential approval alone may not correlate to legislative success for the president. Many of the studies that make these claims discuss a variety of different conditions that must exist. Lockerbie, Borelli, and Hedger (1998) say only in the House of Representatives does high approvals help the president with legislation. Presenting an even more specific condition, Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha (2007) find presidential success in the substance of the legislation increases as the president's approval increases, which lessens the need for compromise by the president. Combining a partisan angle with high approvals, Bond, Fleisher, and Wood (2003) find support that the lack of partisan votes fuels higher presidential approval, which, in turn, increases the president's legislative successes. And finally, some scholars find a need for a more specific condition to exist. For instance, Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002) and Eshbaugh-Soha (2010a) claim if the issue is salient and complex then high approvals do influence the president's legislative success. In addition, some claim the combination of high approvals and going public increases the chances of legislative success for the president. Presidential approval alone cannot establish a correlation (Barrett 2004; Kernell 2006).

Other scholars find nothing significant between presidential approval and legislative success for the president (Bond and Fleisher 1984; Cohen, Bond, and Fleisher 2000; Mouw and MacKuen 1992; Ziegenstein 1983). Unlike the methods used by proponents of

presidential approval's effect on presidential legislative success, Cohen, Bond, and Fleisher's (2000) empirical study only tests one year. Improving upon their approach, Mouw and MacKuen (1992) look at two presidential terms, both Republicans, and they claim presidential approval only convinces members of their own party. One year analysis can lead to issues that do not allow for trends to develop or may capture effects that may or may not exist in other years.

Another variable that has received substantial attention for its potential effect on presidential legislative success is the party division or partisan composition of Congress. When the government is either divided or united, evidence has been provided that there is an effect on presidential legislative success. Specifically, scholars have found a positive correlation between unified government and presidential legislative success (Binder 1999; Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha 2007; Bond and Fleisher 1980; Coleman 1999; Covington, Wrighton, and Kinney 1995; Edwards III, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Eshbaugh-Soha 2010a, 2010b; Ostrom and Simon 1985). Of course, this may only tell part of the relationship. Perhaps the simple divided and unified government designations and their effect on presidential legislative success may get suppressed by bare majorities. Bare majorities can require great party discipline with no room for error.

The partisan composition of Congress aims to provide a more nuanced perspective regarding the simply divided or unified dichotomous determination. Specifically, research measuring the partisan composition of Congress examines the actual percent or number of Congress members who share the partisan identification of the president. Scholars employing this measure have found similar results as with the basic divided and unified government analysis; it does have an effect. As the number of members who share the

president's party affiliation increases, the president's chances for legislative success increases (Bond and Fleisher 1990; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Edwards III 1989; Lockerbie, Borrelli, and Hedger 1998; McCarty and Poole 1995).

One notable exception to this research is by Mayhew (2005), who contends the division of government has little if any impact on presidential legislative success by pointing to major legislative successes that have happened during divided government. Some agree with Mayhew that divided government does not correlate with presidential legislative success (Howell et al. 2000; Barrett 2004; Conley 2000; Jones 2001). Eshbaugh-Soha (2005) claims the party division of Congress can affect the number of legislative proposals from the president, not the outcome of the legislation that actually gets a roll-call vote.

Issue saliency is the level of importance of a given issue at a given time. When an issue is decidedly salient, the voters have it on their mind when evaluating job performance. Which issues are most important to the electorate? The answer will reveal salient issues. Elected officials, generally, will attempt to address salient issues appropriately with legislation. Moreover, Congress will perhaps be more willing to work with the president to ensure passage and avoid criticism from their constituents on more salient issues. At least some scholars have found support for this idea (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002, Eshbaugh-Soha 2010a; Kaufmann 2004). For instance, Kaufmann (2004) provides evidence in support of saliency as it applies to education and how it can strengthen the ties of issue ownership when it comes to campaigning. Education, an issue owned by the Democratic Party, was a salient issue in the 1998 elections that created a favorable environment for Democrats despite controversy surrounding President Clinton.

### *The Missed Opportunity of Previous Scholarly Work*

Of course, researchers have yet to combine these two main areas of research, issue ownership theory and presidential legislative success, to see if there is a potential connection. The basic tenet of issue ownership seems to offer a potential explanation for presidential legislative success. The voters are more easily persuaded by elected officials if they have a history of trust among the electorate on a given issue. Moreover, this trust may pressure members of the opposing party either to surrender on the issue or compromise more so than usual due to this trust.

If it is apparent that one party consistently has the trust of the people on an issue, then the opposing party may see fit to let them have the issue to avoid backlash from their constituents. This is especially true if members of Congress are consistently concerned with their reelection (Mayhew 2004; Fenno 2003; Jacobson 2008). Perhaps presidents see opportunities, due to term limits, to get the upper hand knowing members of Congress always have to keep an eye on the next election. Given this advantage, they may be more successful and willing to push an agenda on issues on which they consistently have the trust of the electorate due to their party identification and its reputation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Data Origins***

To test the performance-side theory of issue ownership, a multivariate logistic model of presidential legislative success in the U.S. House of Representatives was developed and tested. Data for the model were gathered from numerous sources. Specifically, data were attained from The Policy Agendas Project, The American Presidency Project, Library of Congress, and Keith Poole's Voteview website. To avoid the limitations of previous research that only examined a single Congress or presidency, this analysis includes the Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, and Bush II presidencies (1977 through 2004). Out of 15,150 roll-call votes conducted during this period in the U.S. House of Representatives, 2,353 roll-call votes were identified as presidential votes that were recognized by The Policy Agendas Project as votes on which the president specified an opinion on the outcome.

### ***Independent Variables***

The key independent variable in the analysis is issue ownership. Following the work of Petrocik (1996), this variable is coded 1 for all roll-call votes within the issue domains owned by each of the presidents included in the analysis and 0 for all other roll-call votes. Of course, depending on the president and his party identification, the coding changes with the



party of the president and the issue domains they own. If the issue domain of the roll-call vote is owned by the party of the president, then that issue is coded as a 1. If the roll-call vote is not within the issue domain owned by the party of the president, then it is coded as a 0.

Given the literature discussed earlier, the rally 'round the flag effect is designated for each time a major military action is pursued for the month proceeding the initial declaration of that action. After the start of each major military action, all roll-call votes for the following month are coded as 1 and all roll-call votes conducted outside these one-month time frames are coded as 0.

The honeymoon variable is also coded as a dichotomous variable with 1 for all roll-call votes conducted during the first year of a presidential term and 0 for all votes conducted in the remaining three years of the president's term. While Halpert (1991) argues the honeymoon period applies only to a president's first term, I employ the more common coding of this variable and define the first year of both terms as possible honeymoon periods.

Presidential approval is coded simply as the percent of Americans noting approval for the president's job performance as reported by The American Presidency Project. While the American Presidency Project reports weekly approval of the presidents, to avoid too much fluctuation in short-term responses, presidential approval is measured as a monthly average. Short-term events may cause a spike or a spiral in presidential approval, so taking the monthly mean is more representative of the president's approval. Moreover, there are several weeks in each presidency where presidential approval was not recorded or is absent from the American Presidency Project.

Congressional composition is measured with two separate variables. The first variable is a simple dichotomous variable coded 1 for periods of unified government and 0 for periods

of divided government. The second variable is continuous and is measured simply as the number of seats the president's party holds in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The final independent variable is issue saliency, which represents roll-call votes on issues identified as most important to the electorate at any given time. As noted by previous scholars, issue salience may influence the level of cooperation from Congress for the president (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002; Eshbaugh-Soha 2010a); thus, it can have a direct effect on presidential legislative success. Issue saliency is coded as a dichotomous variable with roll-call votes coded as 1 if the legislation is within a salient domain and 0 for all other roll-call votes. Salient issues are identified by data from The Policy Agendas Project, which identifies the most important issues for the country as measured by Gallup. Since the economy, a non-owned issue, is consistently the most important issue, the top three important issues of each year are considered salient for coding purposes.

### ***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable for the model is presidential legislative success. Presidential legislative success is determined by the president achieving the desired result with a roll-call vote. If the president gets his way on a roll-call vote, then it is considered a success and coded a 1 and all other roll-call votes are coded as 0.

In order to quantify presidential legislative success, this study requires the position of the president on each roll-call vote. The Policy Agendas Project included this information in their dataset in which they obtained it from David W. Rohde's *Roll Call Voting Data for the United States House of Representatives, 1953-2004*. Rohde's data gives a simple ye or nay

determination of the president's position. This dichotomous determination was carried over to the Policy Agendas Project.

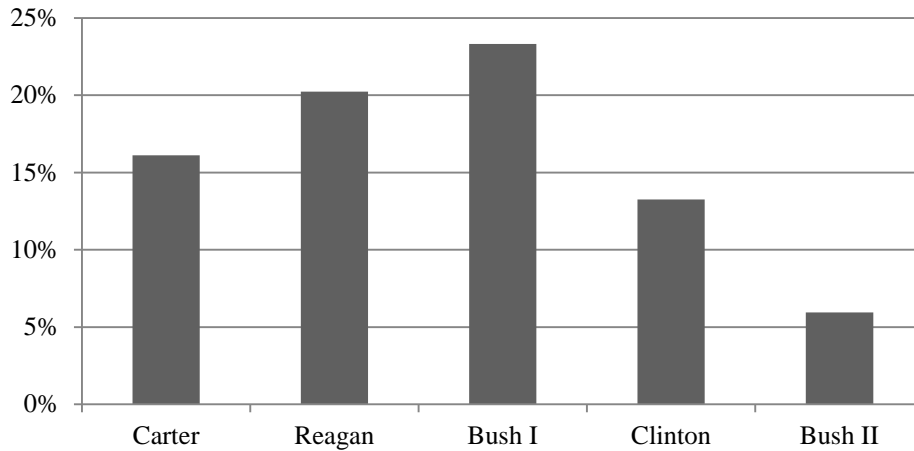
## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Based on the set of variables described above, a multivariate logit analysis is conducted in the following section to examine the independent impact of issue ownership on presidents' legislative success in the U.S. House of Representatives. However, before the multivariate model is discussed, I examine some basic descriptive statistics regarding presidential votes and the impact of issue ownership on presidents' legislative success.

### *Prima Facie Evidence*

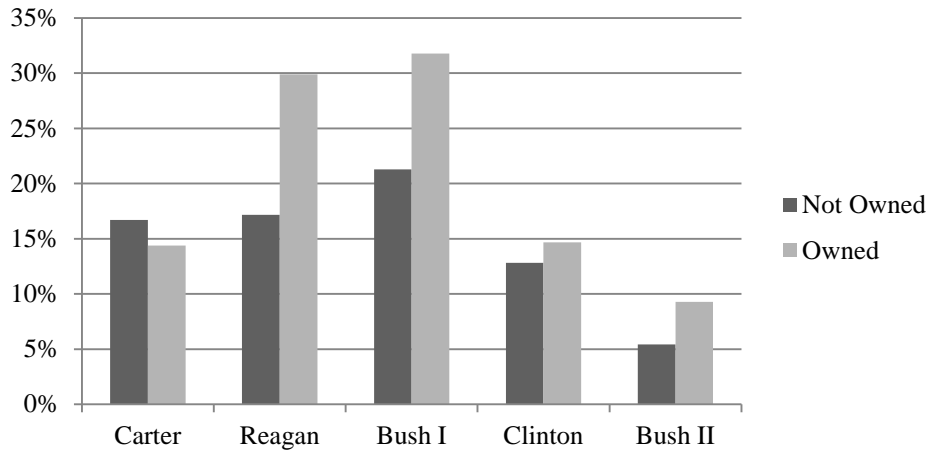
Based on Rohde's data, presidents have provided their position on 2,353 roll-call votes from 1977 to 2004 (Figure 1). In chronological order, first, President Jimmy Carter took a position on 454 roll-call votes while in office, which is just over 16% of all roll-call votes taken during his term. Being more active on position-taking than President Carter during his term, President Reagan took a position on 717 roll-call votes, which is just over 20% of all roll-call votes. President Bush I topped Reagan by taking a position on 415 roll-call votes, which is just over 23% of all roll-call votes. Disrupting the current upwards trend, President Clinton took a position on 635 roll-call votes, which is just over 13% of all roll-call votes. President Bush II took even fewer positions on roll-call votes, only 132, which is just shy of 6% of all roll-call votes.

**Figure 1.** *Percent of all Roll-Call Votes in which Each President Took a Position*



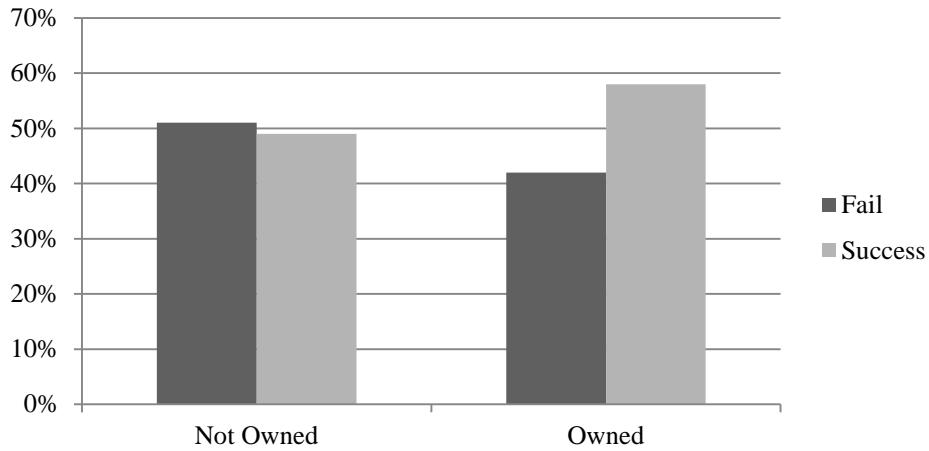
On the roll-call votes, the presidents' position-taking seems to be related to whether the president owned the issue. Figure 2 shows a comparison between presidential position-taking on roll-call votes and issue ownership. At first glance, there does seem to be a trend. Nearly every president follows the expected result; presidents will take a position on issues they own more often than issues they do not. With the exception of President Carter, each president took positions more often on issues he owned compared to the ones he did not. Interestingly, President Carter is the only the president who had unified government during his entire term in office, yet he appeared to express his position more often on issues his party did not own compared to the issues they owned. After the president takes a position and the House of Representatives votes on roll-calls votes, how successful are presidents on the issues they own?

**Figure 2. Issue Ownership and Presidential Position Taking**

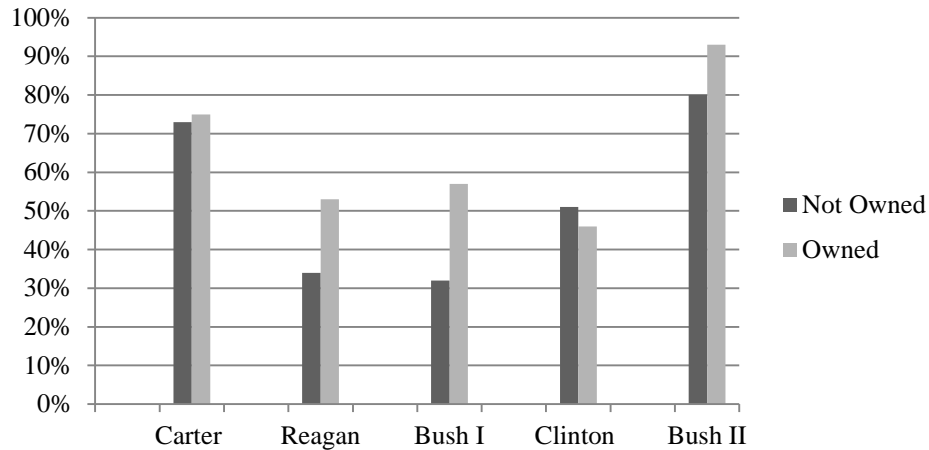


When examining presidential legislative success, issue ownership appears to matter (Figure 3). When the president's party owns the issue, the successes far outweigh the failures. This expectation follows through for nearly all presidents save one. President Clinton is the glaring exception of this trend when breaking it down by president (Figure 4); he had a greater rate of success on roll-call votes his party did not own than the issues they owned. Scholars often claim that during the presidency of Bill Clinton is when the parties started their trajectory towards polarization. Fleisher and Bond (2004) do claim polarization increased considerably beginning in the 1990s. In two years, President Clinton's party lost their majorities in both houses of Congress. The new class of Republican lawmakers was highly ideological and less willing to work with the president. Polarization is often thought of as being quite rigid and an unwillingness to negotiate or compromise on legislation before Congress.

**Figure 3. Issue Ownership and Presidential Legislative Success**



**Figure 4. Issue Ownership and Presidential Legislative Success by President**



***Multivariate Logistic Model***

The results of the logistical model are reported in Table 1. As noted above, the key variable for this analysis is presidential issue ownership. First, examining the full model, the results indicate that whether an issue is owned by the president’s party has a significant effect. Specifically, holding all other factors at the mean or modal position, we find issue ownership increased the probability of presidential success by 12 percent. This clearly represents a substantial increase in the likelihood of a president achieving his preferred

position on roll-call votes. For comparison, the results of the model indicate the honeymoon effect increases a president's likelihood of achieving his preferred outcome by 10% which is slightly less. Considering the substantial attention placed on the honeymoon effect by both pundits and presidential scholars, this suggests that issue ownership is also a significant factor in considering presidential legislative success.

**Table 2: Logistic Models of Presidential Legislative Success**

|                              | <b>Full Model</b> | <b>Carter Model</b> | <b>Reagan Model</b> | <b>Bush I Model</b> | <b>Clinton Model</b> | <b>Bush II Model</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Constant                     | -3.56             | 5.58                | 2.98                | 3.06                | 0.58                 | -33.16               |
| (std error)                  | (0.82)            | (6.89)              | (1.84)              | (2.06)              | (4.12)               | (44.78)              |
| Issue Owned by President     | 0.47*             | 0.01                | 0.75*               | 1.06*               | -0.08                | 1.15                 |
|                              | (0.11)            | (0.26)              | (0.41)              | (0.24)              | (0.20)               | (0.72)               |
| Honeymoon                    | 0.40*             | 0.44                | 1.21*               | 0.86*               | 0.30                 | 1.05                 |
|                              | (0.12)            | (0.48)              | (0.24)              | (0.30)              | (0.24)               | (1.08)               |
| Issue Saliency               | 0.14              | -0.16               | 0.02                | 0.00                | 0.00                 | --                   |
|                              | (0.12)            | (0.25)              | (0.41)              | (0.36)              | (0.22)               | --                   |
| Presidential Approval        | -0.00             | -0.01               | -0.04*              | 0.00                | 0.03*                | 0.12*                |
|                              | (0.01)            | (0.12)              | (0.01)              | (0.01)              | (0.02)               | (0.05)               |
| House Presidential Members   | 0.02*             | -0.02               | -0.01               | -0.02*              | -0.15                | 0.12                 |
|                              | (0.01)            | (0.03)              | (0.01)              | (0.01)              | (0.02)               | (0.20)               |
| Unified Government           | 1.34*             | †                   | †                   | †                   | 3.43*                | 0.74                 |
|                              | (0.32)            | †                   | †                   | †                   | (1.24)               | (0.97)               |
| Rally 'Round the Flag Effect | 0.18              | --                  | -0.43               | 0.72                | -0.90                | -2.20                |
|                              | (0.36)            | --                  | (0.56)              | (1.19)              | (1.10)               | (1.51)               |
| Carter                       | -1.71*            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
|                              | (0.35)            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
| Reagan                       | -0.65*            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
|                              | (0.17)            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
| Bush I                       | -0.01             |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
|                              | (0.14)            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
| Clinton                      | 1.133*            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
|                              | (0.33)            |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
| Bush II                      |                   |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
|                              |                   |                     |                     |                     |                      |                      |
| N                            | 2,353             | 454                 | 717                 | 415                 | 635                  | 132                  |
| % Predicted Correct          | 68.7%             | 73.8%               | 62.2%               | 64.1%               | 71.0%                | 84.8%                |

\* prob < 0.05, value; † Only unified or divided government existed during this time.



While the full model clearly indicates issue ownership significantly increases the probability of legislative success, the individual president models indicate it does not apply to all presidents. Specifically, while Republicans have achieved significantly greater success with issues owned by their party, this has not been the case for Democratic presidents. Neither President Carter nor President Clinton appear to have achieved greater legislative success on issues they own compared to issues they do not own. This may be due to the individual skills of these two presidents or perhaps unique to the issues owned by the Democratic Party. Specifically, considering that military issues are owned by the Republican Party, the president's voice in these matters may play a greater role, as opposed to civil rights, which the Democrats own and are consistently more divisive.

Carmines and Stimson (1980) find hard issues, such as military action, tend to give presidents more deference from the electorate, especially the ill-informed, which a whole body of literature has determined makes up an overwhelming majority of voters (Bartels 1996; Converse 1975; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1995). Given the ownership of military issues, Republican presidents have a double advantage. Not only do they own the issue, and therefore have the trust of the voters, they also benefit from the fact that military issues receive greater deference than other issues as a whole. This most likely leads to greater legislative success for a Republican president on the issues his party owns. The Democratic Party does not have this dual effect on the issues they own. The issues they own tend to be ones that can create strong disparate opinions even within the Democratic Party. This decisiveness can make it harder for a Democratic president to get his preferred result.

For the remaining variables, the model generally supports previous research on presidential success. First, presidents achieve greater success during their first year in office (the honeymoon period) as opposed to the remaining years in their term. Second, as the number of members from the president's party increases in the House, he is also more likely to achieve legislative success. Finally, the model, not surprisingly, provides evidence that presidents are more successful under unified government.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Another potential variable not included in the analysis here is Aldrich and Rhode's conditional party government. Although I fully admit it may have an effect on presidential legislative success, I cannot figure out a way to operationalize it as it relates to this specific study.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

### *Historical Progression*

Petrocik's issue ownership has been a major research topic since its introduction in the mid-1990s. Interestingly, he recognizes presidents must pay attention to public opinion polls about who they trust on specific issues and recognize what helps or hurts them when campaigning, even if they are not cognizant of the aspects of issue ownership theory. Of course, it has been established in the political science literature that political candidates and elected officials tend to notice public opinion polls, but to make the connection to issue ownership was a new feature presented by Petrocik.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the theory is the need for consistent support from the electorate on an issue domain in order for one of the parties to own the issue. As a result, numerous studies have evidenced the strength of its central claim—candidates for president will focus on issues their party owns to garner support from the public with the hope of being elected or reelected. Even when forced to talk about issues not owned by the party, presidents will attempt to frame it within an issue they own. For instance, presidential candidates of the Democratic Party may discuss the economy in terms of giving the people better access to education while presidential candidates of the Republican Party may discuss the economy in terms of lowering taxes on businesses for job creation.

Soon after the initial findings of issue ownership theory, as it applies to presidential campaigns, studies began to apply it to congressional campaigns. These studies found similar results to presidential campaigns. Congress members follow the same pattern of what issues to discuss during campaign season, and those issues tend to be the ones they own according to their party identification. This has helped generalize issue ownership theory to two groups of political actors who represent different constituencies. The different constituency topic opens the theory up to more than just federal level political actors.

Now, the topic of issue ownership goes beyond just campaign rhetoric. In this study, the evidence has supported the idea of issue ownership as it relates to presidential legislative success, which provides a more performance-based analysis. If the presidents' party owns the issue, they increase their chances of legislative success. Many variables have been tested to verify whether presidents have greater legislative success under certain criteria. Issue ownership is another potential explanation that may help explain their success on legislation. The results of the current study have several implications on the presidents' ability to achieve legislative success.

### ***Discussion of Implications***

Given the findings of this study, there is an array of potential implications. The strength of the relationship between issue ownership and legislative success suggests the issues presidential candidates campaign on are the same issue domains in which they achieve greater legislative success. Moreover, the old diatribe that presidential candidates do not keep any campaign promises seems unsupported by these findings. Even when presidents oppose roll-call votes that involve issue ownership, they probably do it to prevent the

opposition from negatively impacting the issue. Later, they can utilize the trust given by the electorate on the issue by stating how they protected their interests.

Congress perhaps does give some deference to presidents if it involves an issue the presidents' party owns given divided government's dominance in the national government during the time of the study. President Carter is the only president to enjoy unified government for an entire term. With one party controlling the executive branch and the other controlling at least one house of the legislature, compromise is a necessity to get anything done legislatively. And the results here may imply the issues owned by the presidents' party receive a greater degree of deference from the opposition party.

The glaring difference between Democratic presidents and Republican presidents in the proportion of success and failure of roll-call votes on issues their party owns is striking. It becomes even more confounding since unified government existed more often under the Democratic presidents. Perhaps the Democratic presidents assumed, since they had a unified government situation, they could push for more extreme policy when it involved issues they own. In response to these attempts, they scared away the more moderate wing of the party in addition to the Republican Party caucus. Bill Clinton's health care bill illustrated what can happen within the party when their president goes too extreme on policy in their eyes.

### *Conclusions*

This study set out to develop an application for issue ownership theory to presidents' performance on legislation. The hypothesis that presidents increase their chance for legislative success in issue domains their party owns tested with a set of control variables has

yielded the expected results. Issue ownership expands its reach to a performance aspect which seems to reinforce the original aspect for campaign rhetoric.

In addition, this study reinforces some of the control variables as they apply to presidential legislative success. The honeymoon period appears a strong predictor of legislative success as does the unified government variable. If presidents want to pass more controversial legislation, even legislation related to issues his party owns, then they need to act in the first year to maximize their chances. The unified government variable has a positive effect on legislative success for the president as well. Like the honeymoon, the president can increase his chances of achieving his legislative agenda if he can somehow get or keep his party in control of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Until now, the studies about issue ownership have limited themselves to campaign rhetoric, missing an important aspect of politics: actual performance on policy. Campaigning only tells part of the story, so knowing theories have the potential to offer evidence on the performance-side of politics can help with generalizability of the campaign and elections literature and the actual work performed by the president. But now that the barrier has been shattered, it allows for expanding issue ownership theory to the state level.

If data are available, it may be worthwhile for political scholars whose interests are state politics to apply the theory to governors and state legislators. Do they campaign on different issues and is it because the parties' issue ownership changes at the state level? This theory may offer an explanation of why some states experience quite a bit of ticket splitting. Ticket splitting is when a voter votes for one party for one position while voting for the other party for a different position. The issues owned by a party at the federal level may change at the state level, which may help explain why the electorate is willing to vote for different

parties at different levels of government. West Virginia does this often in recent history; residents will vote for Democrats at the state level but have come to vote more Republican at the federal level. Perhaps one potential explanation is that the Democrats at the state level are supportive of the coal industry while their federal counterparts tend to push for heavy environmental regulation on the industry. As a result, the state level Democrats may not own the issue of the environment as they do at the federal level, so they are not associated with federal level Democrats on this issue. This is but one potential example of how issue ownership can apply to the states.

After discovering whether the theory can apply to the state level about campaigning, scholars can extend it to see if there is a performance-side connection by looking at governor's legislative success in the state legislature. This assumes the information is accessible in the states, which may not be true for some states. If it is, then state politics scholars can do similar testing extrapolated here.

Given the glaring absence of the Senate in the analysis of presidential legislative success, future research could attempt to incorporate Senate roll-call votes. Of course, Senate analysis opens up many other issues that may affect presidential legislative success considering the numerous rules that exist in the chamber that do not exist in the House of Representative. But it is an area with little, if any, data analysis and could explain fully presidential legislative success, something no one has achieved to my knowledge.

Issue ownership theory has been used as a potential explanation for why candidates and elected officials say what they say or, as implied by the current study, do what they do. Presidents and members of Congress alike will do almost everything they can to ensure reelection while their opponents will do what they can to unseat them. Issue ownership may

be important in offering a potential explanation on how they do it. It is but one tool to use when trying to figure out what these political actors do while in office and why they do it.



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## **Vita**

Jeffery Charles Martin was born in Janesville, Wisconsin, on October 28, 1977. He moved with his family to Indiana and graduated from Huntington North High School in Huntington, Indiana. In 2008, he entered University of North Carolina at Greensboro to study Political Science with a focus on American politics. Three years later, in the fall of 2011, he entered Appalachian State University and started studying for a Master of Arts Degree in Political Science, which was subsequently awarded in August 2013.