

# The Politics of Competence

Parties, Public Opinion and Voters

Jane Green and Will Jennings



*'The Politics of Competence* provides a compelling analysis of party competence – its causes, electoral consequences and political significance. This landmark study draws together disparate theories, assembles a prodigious amount of data and uses advanced statistical techniques, to provide a fascinating accounts of the shifting relationship between parties and their electorates. Sophisticated, yet also accessible to the general reader, this book instantly becomes the gold standard in studies of party competence.'

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'Central to theories of how voters evaluate parties are ideas that one party is better able than another to handle a given issue. But how do voters develop these evaluations? And what is the role of actual performance of a party in government? In this theoretically ambitious, empirically rich and truly comparative book, Green and Jennings break new ground. They show that parties regularly gain and lose 'ownership' on particular issues, that partisanship strongly affects perceptions of performance, that governments inexorably lose support and reputations for competence and they develop a new theoretical perspective towards how voters evaluate parties. Rich with data, comparative in approach and equally theoretical as empirical, this book sets a new standard in the fields of issue ownership on a par with previous works by Donald Stokes, John Petrocik, and William Riker.'

**Frank R. Baumgartner**, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*,  
*co-author of The Politics of Information (2015).*

Cover image designed by Mike Addelman

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*Parties, Public Opinion and Voters*

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Jane Green

*University of Manchester*

Will Jennings

*University of Southampton*



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## The Politics of Competence

Using decades of public opinion data from the US, UK, Australia, Germany and Canada, and distinguishing between three concepts – issue ownership, performance and generalised competence – Green and Jennings show how political parties come to gain or lose ‘ownership’ of issues, how they are judged on their performance in government across policy issues, and how they develop a reputation for competence (or incompetence) over a period in office. Their analysis tracks the major events that lead people to re-evaluate party reputations and the costs of governing, and cause electorates to punish parties in power. They reveal why, when and how these movements in public opinion matter to elections. The implications are important for long-standing debates about performance and partisanship, and reveal that public opinion about party and governing competence is, to a great extent, the product of major shocks and predictable dynamics.

Jane Green is Professor of Political Science at the University of Manchester and a co-director of the British Election Study, the UK’s leading source of election data since 1964.

Will Jennings is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton.



To Bruce and Natalie





## Acknowledgements

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The idea of issue ownership was first introduced to us by Laura Stoker. The challenge to think about what ownership is – and is not – inspired a PhD, subsequent research papers and this book. Laura also inspired the ambition to think more carefully about concepts and measures and the validity of argument, concepts and findings. Our book would also not exist without the inspiration and contributions of Jim Stimson. Our interest in long-term dynamics and context for understanding public opinion, and most of our thinking about the nature and nuances of public opinion, owes in very large part to Jim and his extraordinary generosity of ideas, data and methods. We are also both fortunate in being inspired by Christopher Wlezien, whose drive and quality of scholarship continues to challenge and motivate us. And we are lucky to have been taught by Christopher Hood while we were graduate students at Oxford. We hope to do justice to his example of thoughtfulness, originality and scholarliness. We would like to give credit to Donald Stokes, and to all those people whose work we continually return to, and whose contributions established the standard to which the political science community responds. If we have succeeded in combining novel analysis with political relevance and understanding, there is David Butler's guidance in these pages.

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