

Dialogue in American Political Campaigns? An Examination of Issue Convergence in Candidate Television Advertising

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The theory of issue ownership holds that competing candidates should avoid discussing many of the same issues during a campaign. In contrast, theories of democracy suggest that competitive elections are the mechanism by which the public can hold politicians accountable. To determine the extent to which each theory depicts current campaigns, we develop a new measure of "issue convergence" and test whether or not issue convergence increases as the competitiveness of the race increases. Using new data based upon television advertising aired in U.S. Senate campaigns from 1998 through 2002, we find that issue engagement or dialogue occurs more frequently than indicated by previous research. We also find that issue engagement increases with the competitiveness of the race but that issue engagement decreases as the gap in financial resources between candidates increases.

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, a theory of issue ownership has emerged and gained support among scholars (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Simon 2002). At its core, issue ownership theory posits that during a campaign a political candidate will only discuss an issue if the public perceives the candidate's party to be better able to handle the issue than his opponent. This is because a candidate never wants to increase the salience of an issue that favors his opponent in the run-up to an election due to its potential to hurt the candidate at the ballot box. As Petrocik writes, the "campaigns waged by the candidates increase the salience of some problems and, in doing so, cause voters to use their party linked conception of the issue handling ability of the candidates to choose between (or among) them" (1996, 826–27).

Part of the appeal of issue ownership theory is that it provides an explanation for the apparent lack of issue discussion in political campaigns. Contemporary accounts of U.S. political campaigns in the media commonly bemoan the lack of meaningful discussion of the issues. Indeed, such accounts seem consistent with Fishkin's description of *nondeliberation*: "an endpoint where an alternative is not contrasted effectively with its rivals, where arguments are not answered, and where the decision makers have little competence or factual background to evaluate the proposals offered to them" (1991, 38).

From a theoretical perspective, issue ownership theory is interesting because its prediction of "nondeliberation" (i.e., no dialogue) is inconsistent with normative theories of democracy. Such theories consider campaign dialogue an essential prerequisite of informed democratic choice. Kelley, for instance, suggests that a campaign "should expose the grounds on which candidates

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disagree and the differences between the candidates—differences of personality, interest, affiliation, policy commitment, and all others that may affect performance in office” (1960, 14). In other words, issue ownership theories suggest that a vital component of the democratic system does not function.

Though contemporary theories of democracy differ in myriad ways, almost all identify competitive elections as a necessary condition and the mechanism by which candidates are induced to behave in a fashion consistent with normative democratic theories of political accountability. For example, Schattschneider wrote:

Above everything, *the people are powerless if the political enterprise is not competitive*. It is the competition of political organizations that provides the people with the opportunity to make a choice. Without this opportunity popular sovereignty amounts to nothing. . . . *Democracy is a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision making process*. (1960, 140–41, emphasis in original)

Competitive elections are necessary for campaign dialogue, according to this theory of democracy. Extending this logic, then, more competitive campaigns should lead to increased issue convergence. Such an expectation is inconsistent with at least one version of issue ownership theory, which predicts that issue convergence should never occur in competitive campaigns (Simon 2002).

In order to test the degree to which current campaigns are consistent with contemporary democratic theory and issue ownership theory, respectively, we develop a new measure of “issue convergence” to explore whether or not issue convergence increases as the competitiveness of the race increases. We also test to see if issue convergence is lower for owned issues than for nonowned issues. The article proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the development of issue ownership theory and notes some of its more problematic aspects, both theoretical and empirical. The third section outlines the data we use to develop a new measure of issue convergence and to test the two theories. The fourth section compares issue convergence in presidential campaigns to issue convergence in Senate campaigns. The fifth section discusses the statistical model we use to analyze variation in issue convergence between Senate campaigns. The sixth section reviews the results of the multivariate analysis. The conclusion notes how an understanding of the limits of issue ownership sheds light on theories of democracy and helps provide

an understanding of current political campaigns. We also discuss implications of this work for future research.

Theoretical and Empirical Considerations

Theoretical Issues

We suggest that there are at least three theoretical reasons to expect campaign dialogue. The first, ironically, is found within issue ownership theory itself. Both Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996) predict some campaign dialogue. This prediction flows from their division of issues into two categories: owned and performance.¹ By definition, performance issues are not owned. Both works specify that performance issues will usually elicit some dialogue. The classic example of a performance issue is government performance, especially in regard to the state of the national economy, national security, and foreign relations. Since Petrocik (1996) is only interested in campaign dialogue relating to owned issues, he excludes performance issues from his empirical analysis. Budge and Farlie write that “on foreign relations, candidates and government record, everything depends on the current situation, who are the party leaders, and what the government has done. Such issues are not permanently owned by any party but may be annexed temporarily. Often, of course, the results of an election will depend upon which party takes them over at the time. Hence most direct argument and confrontation will be focused in this area” (1983, 42).

Another reason to expect campaign dialogue is provided by contemporary democratic theory.² As suggested by the median voter theorem, the more competitive the race, the greater the pressure on the candidates to appear moderate ideologically. As Downs notes in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, each party may cast “some policies into the other’s territory in order to convince voters there that its net position is near them” (1957, 135). In essence, a candidate can create a more moderate image by taking a few positions consonant with the opponent’s party position (often on an issue “owned” by the opponent’s party) and publicizing them. Examples are numerous. Democrat Charles Schumer takes a relatively conservative position on the death penalty issue, and Republican John McCain

¹However, the owned versus performance typology of issue may be problematic since some issues cannot be readily categorized as one or the other.

²Budge and Farlie explicitly contrast their theory to a more “rational choice” approach to vote choice in a democracy (146, 157–58).

sounds like a Democrat on the issue of campaign finance reform.³ Both candidates walked to reelection in 2004. Scholars (and politicians) have long recognized that candidates often find it in their interest to distinguish their positions from those of the party—and publicize those differences—when the party's positions are unpopular with the politician's constituency (Arnold 1990; Mayhew 1974; Sellers 1998).

The final reason to expect issue convergence, and more specifically to expect issue convergence to increase as electoral competitiveness increases, flows from Basinger and Lavine's (2005) argument about the effect of ambivalence about parties' positions on voter decision making. They suggest that in low-stimulus campaign environments, voters tend to use partisan cues as a basis for voting because they lack the detailed knowledge necessary for issue voting. But in high-stimulus campaign environments, ambivalence about the major parties steers voters away from using partisan cues and toward using an alternative decision rule, such as issue or ideological voting. Thus Basinger and Lavine provide a mechanism that explains why voters in more competitive Senate elections are less likely to depend upon partisan cues and more likely to engage in issue and ideological voting (Franklin 1991; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Westlye 1991).

This insight has two important implications for candidate strategy. First, as voters rely less upon partisan cues and rely more on issue voting, the greater the pressure for candidates to discuss the same issues. This is because as the number of issue voters increases, neither candidate can allow her opponent to dominate the information flow (and, hence, framing) on any one issue. Second, challengers clearly have an incentive to induce ambivalence regarding the opponent's party since the results of the previous election suggest that the "normal" vote favors the incumbent (Converse 1966; Jacobson 2001). To undermine partisan cues and increase voter ambivalence regarding the opponent's party (and the opponent herself) requires that a candidate mention issues that traditionally favor the opponent's party.⁴

³Of course, the flip side is true also. A candidate may try to paint the opposition as not moderate (i.e., out of the mainstream). Just think of George H. W. Bush's use of the word "liberal" when characterizing Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis in 1988.

⁴A nice example is George Bush's advertisement about the polluted state of Boston Harbor during Dukakis's governorship. The environment is usually considered an issue owned by the Democrats (certainly, environmentalists belong to the Democratic Party coalition). Such an attack on Dukakis's environmental record is likely to generate ambivalence among those voters who tend to think that the Democratic candidate has an edge on environmental issues. Indeed, a key component driving the use of attack ads may be their success in generating ambivalence.

Empirical Limitations of Issue Engagement

Recently, Sigelman and Buell (2004) mounted a major empirical challenge to issue ownership theorists. They argued that most existing studies do not actually measure the concept of dialogue, suggesting, for example, that Petrocik's (2003) work on the topic does not directly examine how much competing campaigns discuss common issues. Instead, these studies report the percentage of the time that a candidate is engaged in discussion of issues owned by the other political party. Likewise, Simon (2002) does not directly measure dialogue as it is commonly understood. Instead, he defines dialogue as the minority position's share of total attention that was given to an issue. But, as Sigelman and Buell trenchantly note, Simon is really measuring "the extent to which a race featured an even-handed expression of different positions on the issues, not the extent to which the competitors discussed the same issues" (2004, 7). Using a new measure of "issue convergence," Sigelman and Buell (2004) demonstrate "a high degree of similarity in the issue emphases" of competing presidential candidates from 1960–2000. This finding is at odds with issue ownership theory and the results of most previous empirical investigations.

An additional limitation of previous studies is that they have focused disproportionately on presidential campaigns and have ignored literally thousands of other political campaigns.⁵ Because presidential elections feature at least 10 to 20 times the spending of an average Senate race and perhaps 100 times the spending of an average race for the House of Representatives, one must question the portability of the results to other types of races.

Another drawback of previous research is the source of the data used to measure the issue content of campaigns. Except for Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003), all previous work has relied upon content analyses of newspaper articles to measure the issue content of campaigns. The problem is that newspapers offer filtered reports of the candidates' activities. Because of structural biases in the production of the news, journalists tend to privilege certain issues—those that can be expressed in a narrative format (Bennett 2003), those that illustrate a conflict between candidates (Leighley 2004), and clear-cut issues on which competing candidates take distinctive positions (Patterson 1980, 1993). Journalists also privilege certain types of campaigns—those that are local, those that are tight, and those that are deemed important. Finally, newspaper reports of the candidates' activities also reflect

⁵Simon (2002) and Sides (2006) appear to be the only works to move beyond the study of presidential races by looking at Senate races.

exogenous factors such as the size of the news hole for the particular day (Graber 1997). All of these considerations suggest that scholars should be wary of any conclusions concerning candidate dialogue that are based solely upon newspaper coverage of campaigns.

Indeed, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) show that media coverage of issues in presidential campaigns does not track the emphases of the candidates in presidential campaigns. The *New York Times*, for instance, portrayed Democrats as talking solely about Democratic-owned issues, a picture far different from the one conveyed by their nomination speeches and television advertisements. The authors summarize: “We are inclined to believe that the press (as the *Times* represents it) operates from a more partisan perspective than the campaigns, emphasizing issues that reinforce the party cleavage even more than the candidates do” (2003, 21).

In recognition of these shortcomings, previous studies have limited their research to candidate-generated statements, i.e., remarks that can be attributed to a candidate or a campaign spokesperson (e.g., Simon 2002). Although this may help sharpen the measure of dialogue, it is not a general panacea. For example, it cannot account for the possibility that the candidates may be discussing issues not covered by the newspaper.

Because of these problems, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) use advertisements to examine candidate strategies. This is an improvement over the use of newspaper coverage because the content of candidate advertising is a clear and direct indicator of which issues the candidate prioritizes. Advertising is unfiltered by reporters and is broadcast directly to voters. Moreover, because advertising is costly to produce, campaigns put much more thought into the messages they want to convey. The problem with the approach as used by Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) is that their unit of analysis is each advertisement itself (“the creative”), not the ad airing. By taking this approach, the authors are implicitly weighting each ad equally, regardless of whether it aired once or aired 10,000 times. As Prior (2001) has shown, the number of ads produced is a poor indicator of ads aired. And when assessing issue convergence, one needs to know whether ads about the same issue produced by competing candidates were aired a similar number of times or whether one candidate’s airings greatly outstripped those of his opponent.⁶

In this article, we correct for the limitations of these previous studies in three ways. First, we describe the issue content of campaigns through the use of candidate

advertising, which directly taps the messages the candidates want to communicate to voters. More importantly, the data that we use describe not only the content of the advertising but the frequency with which each advertisement aired. This allows us to avoid the problem of assuming that all ads were aired the same number of times. Second, building on the work of Sigelman and Buell (2004), we measure dialogue such that it describes the extent to which competing candidates discuss the same issues. Finally, we examine both 1998, 2000, and 2002 Senate campaigns and the 2000 presidential campaign. This unique perspective allows us to make comparisons between the two types of campaigns to determine if presidential campaigns are indeed an outlier in terms of candidate dialogue.

Data

Our data on the content of candidate advertising come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which obtained these data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), a commercial firm which tracks television advertising.⁷ Using space satellites and “ad detectors” located in the largest media markets in the United States, CMAG’s computers recorded the date, hour, and television station on which each political ad aired during the 1998, 2000, and 2002 election campaigns (see Ridout et al. [2003] for a more detailed description of the data collection and assessments of its quality). The company’s computers also created a visual storyboard with accompanying text of the audio for each unique advertisement. In 1998 and 2000, CMAG tracked advertising in the 75 largest media markets in the United States, which contain about 80% of all households with televisions. In 2002, the number of markets tracked rose to 100, covering about 86% of the country’s television audience.

Using the storyboards provided by CMAG, a team of undergraduate and graduate student coders then evaluated each advertisement on several attributes, including the issues mentioned. Coders were allowed to mark up to four issues per advertisement, although the vast majority of ads mentioned only one issue. Coders could choose from approximately 50 different issue categories each year. Almost all categories were consistent across years, though a few that reflected topical concerns, such as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, were dropped, and others, such as terrorism, were added.

⁶Sides (2006) uses data on campaign ad airings to discuss the origins of campaign agendas.

⁷CMAG is now known as TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG).

Although the data set is quite comprehensive, we do note one limitation: we are missing data on 14 Senate races because these races occurred in states that did not overlap with one of the largest media markets in the country. These races were those in Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.⁸ We also excluded from our data set all Senate races featuring incumbents without major party opponents or opponents who were sacrificial lambs. We define a sacrificial lamb as a major party candidate who did not run any television campaign advertisements. This is readily justifiable since the two theories, as specified, require the presence of two major party candidates. In the end, we were left with 65 Senate campaigns in the data set. We also excluded advertisements run by parties and interest groups. Theoretically, such ads are independent expenditures beyond the control of candidate decision making. If one's goal is to analyze the extent to which candidate decision making itself results in issue convergence, as is our goal, then these exclusions are not problematic. If, however, one's purpose is to examine the effect of discourse on the citizens who receive messages about the candidates, then one might want to expand the analysis beyond candidate advertisements to include other advertising and news media coverage of the candidates as well.⁹

Campaign-Level Convergence: Comparing Senate with Presidential Campaigns

We followed the approach of Sigelman and Buell (2004) in measuring issue convergence at the campaign level. The formula that they provide for calculating campaign-level convergence is

$$100 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n |P_{D_i} - P_{R_i}| / 2 \right) \quad (1)$$

where P_{D_i} and P_{R_i} are the percentage of total attention that the Democratic candidate and Republican candidate gave to a certain issue, i , respectively. In our usage, the candidates' total resources are equal to the total number of issue mentions. Thus, P_{D_i} is the percentage of the Democratic candidate's ad airings that mention issue i ,

⁸It is important to note that these 14 races were not missing at random; they were from the states with very small populations. This selection of cases on an independent variable does not cause any estimation problems—coefficients remain unbiased—but it does limit our ability to generalize our results to the smallest states.

⁹Campaign-sponsored ads constituted over 80% of all ads aired in the Senate races we examined.

and P_{R_i} is the percentage of the Republican candidate's ad airings mentioning issue i . This formula yields a measure of issue convergence that ranges from 0 to 100. To illustrate how this measure is calculated, consider a situation in which there are only three potential issues about which candidates could speak, issues A , B , and C .

	Issue A	Issue B	Issue C	Campaign Convergence
Democratic Candidate	60	20	20	70
Republican Candidate	40	50	10	

Imagine that the Democrat devotes 60% of his resources to issue A , 20% of his resources to issue B , and 20% of his resources to issue C . Imagine that his Republican opponent devotes 40% of his resources to issue A , 50% of his resources to issue B , and 10% of his resources to issue C . To calculate issue convergence, we first subtract the candidate percentages for each issue and take their absolute values, summing across all issues: $|60 - 40| + |20 - 50| + |20 - 10| = 60$. The last steps are to divide by two and to subtract from 100 to create a measure of convergence rather than divergence. Our final measure of campaign-level convergence in this instance, then, is $100 - 60/2 = 70$.

Table 1 reports calculations of campaign-level convergence in the 65 Senate races that we examined. Across the races, the average level of issue convergence was 44.1, with a standard deviation of 16.7. Campaign-level convergence ranged from 0 in the 2000 New Mexico race and the 2002 Illinois race to 67.4 in the 1998 Kentucky race.

Sigelman and Buell (2004), based upon 14 presidential elections, report an average level of issue convergence of 71.4, with a standard deviation of 4.6. This means that one candidate would have to reallocate only 28.6% of her issue rhetoric for there to be perfect issue convergence. The value ranged from 63.3 for the 1972 presidential election to 77.5 for the 2000 presidential election. Clearly, the issue convergence scores reported by Sigelman and Buell (2004) are higher than the scores we calculated for the Senate campaigns. Indeed, the average level of issue convergence in the presidential races was four points higher than the maximum level in the Senate races.

The obvious question is whether the different scores are substantively meaningful, or whether they are an artifact of the different data sources. If meaningful, there would appear to be significantly less issue convergence in Senate races than in presidential campaigns. Though this interpretation is appealing intuitively, it would be reassuring to test if the difference was an artifact of the differences in data sources.

TABLE 1 Campaign-Level Convergence

State	Year	Converge	State	Year	Converge	State	Year	Converge
KY	98	0.67	NY	00	0.67	MO	02	0.67
WI	98	0.65	NE	00	0.57	IA	02	0.65
NV	98	0.64	PA	00	0.56	NH	02	0.62
SC	98	0.61	VA	00	0.53	NC	02	0.61
MO	98	0.60	MS	00	0.50	MN	02	0.61
WA	98	0.59	TN	00	0.50	AR	02	0.60
FL	98	0.55	TX	00	0.50	GA	02	0.57
NY	98	0.55	WI	00	0.50	OR	02	0.52
GA	98	0.54	MN	00	0.48	TN	02	0.51
AR	98	0.54	MO	00	0.45	SC	02	0.50
MD	98	0.52	WA	00	0.41	TX	02	0.50
CA	98	0.50	UT	00	0.41	ME	02	0.48
LA	98	0.50	CA	00	0.39	CO	02	0.47
IL	98	0.50	MI	00	0.37	OK	02	0.40
CT	98	0.49	DE	00	0.36	ID	02	0.38
CO	98	0.48	FL	00	0.35	KY	02	0.31
NC	98	0.45	NJ	00	0.34	NM	02	0.27
OR	98	0.40	IN	00	0.34	AL	02	0.26
IN	98	0.31	RI	00	0.27	NJ	02	0.17
			NV	00	0.27	LA	02	0.03
			CT	00	0.26	IL	02	0.00
			MD	00	0.19			
			ME	00	0.18			
			GA	00	0.04			
			NM	00	0.00			

Mean: 0.441, SD: 0.168, Min: 0.000, Max: 0.674.

One way to address this concern is to compare our Senate race scores with scores for the 2000 presidential election calculated from the ad-tracking data. Using these data, we calculated an issue convergence score of 68 for the 2000 presidential campaign. Though slightly less than 71% reported by Sigelman and Buell (2004) for the 2000 presidential campaign, the difference is small. Furthermore, 68% issue convergence falls within one standard deviation of the mean level of issue convergence calculated by Sigelman and Buell (2004). And the 68% issue convergence in the 2000 presidential campaign is greater than that of any Senate race. Though we are hesitant to generalize, it appears that the difference in data sources had a negligible effect on the calculation of issue convergence and does not account for the majority of the difference between the two types of races.

The data suggest, then, that Senate campaigns are qualitatively different than presidential campaigns. On average, there is considerably less issue convergence in

Senate races than in the presidential race. Furthermore, issue convergence among Senate races exhibits far greater variation than among presidential races. Though this difference between presidential and Senate campaigns cannot be readily accounted for by issue ownership theory, it is consistent with the predictions provided by contemporary democratic theory.

Modeling Issue-Level Convergence Between Senate Campaigns

The Dependent Variable

Unlike campaign-level convergence where each campaign was given an overall convergence measure, for issue-level convergence we require a measure of convergence for each issue in each campaign. We define issue convergence as the difference in resources devoted to issue *i* as a function of the total resources devoted to issue *i*. We then take the

absolute value of this difference, subtract from 1 and then multiply by 100 (so the scale ranges from 0 to 100).

Again, P_{D_i} and P_{R_i} are the percentage of total attention that the Democratic and Republican candidates gave to a certain issue, i , respectively.

$$(1 - |(P_{D_i} - P_{R_i}) / (P_{D_i} + P_{R_i})|) * 100 \quad (2)$$

Since we require a measure of convergence for each issue (per campaign), we weighted each issue by the total resources devoted to the issue. From the previous example, issue convergence for issue A is $(1 - |(60 - 40) / 100|) * 100 = 80$, for issue B is $(1 - |(20 - 50) / 70|) * 100 = 57$, and for issue C is $(1 - |(20 - 10) / 30|) * 100 = 67$.

	Issue A	Issue B	Issue C
Democratic Candidate	60	20	20
Republican Candidate	40	50	10
Issue Convergence	80	57	67

This measure, at the campaign-issue level, is therefore congruent to Sigelman and Buell’s (2004) measure at the campaign level. We are left with 982 cases at the campaign-issue level of analysis (i.e., the 65 campaigns raised approximately 15 issues on average). The variable ranged from 0 to 100 with a mean of 24.85 and a standard deviation of 34.73. (See Table 2 for summary statistics).

Campaign-Level Predictors

We hypothesize that the competitiveness of the race, the size of the electorate, and the extent to which the candidates run negative campaigns all may affect the amount of dialogue. As previously stated, more competitive campaigns should breed more dialogue because more competitive campaigns are higher-stimulus campaigns, ones in which voters have enough knowledge to vote on the basis of issues as opposed to partisanship. Thus candidates must pay more attention to issues as well to avoid being defined by an opponent. Alternatively, competitiveness can be thought of in terms of fiscal resources. Because resources are finite, the candidates cannot talk about everything they might want to address in their campaign communications. Thus, underfunded challengers may be less likely to engage in dialogue with their opponents than well-funded challengers.

Lee and Oppenheimer suggest that the political heterogeneity of a state’s population may influence Senate campaigns along a variety of dimensions (1999, 83–122). Extending their logic, we suggest that Senate candidates

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics of Campaign and Issue-Level Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Issue Convergence	982	24.85	34.73	0.00	99.98
Competitiveness (CQ Ranking)	65	1.54	1.20	0.00	3.00
Total Spending/Capita (millions)	65	3.47	2.71	0.28	13.39
Difference Spending/Capita (millions)	65	1.12	1.32	0.03	9.26
State Voting Age Pop. (millions-ln)	65	1.20	0.85	-0.65	3.13
Percent Negative Ads	65	21.38	16.84	0.00	54.96
2000 Year (binary)	65	0.38	0.49	0.00	1.00
2002 Year (binary)	65	0.32	0.47	0.00	1.00
Consensual Issue (binary)	43	0.28	0.45	0.00	1.00
Issue Owned (binary)	43	0.49	0.51	0.00	1.00
Issue Salience	43	2.86	6.38	0.00	35.63

will have a more difficult time ducking issues in smaller, more homogeneous states than larger, more heterogeneous states. Thus, one should see less dialogue in larger, more heterogeneous states. Finally, a campaign may feature more dialogue when one of the candidates “goes negative” (Lau and Pomper 2002; Lau et al. 1999; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995; Theilmann and Wilhite 1998). When a candidate accuses an opponent of being on the wrong side of an issue, the opponent may be tempted to respond on that issue, thus introducing dialogue into the campaign. If, for example, a Republican runs an advertisement claiming her Democratic opponent “wants to raise your taxes,” the Democrat may respond with an advertisement pledging not to raise taxes.

We now turn to our operationalization of these variables in the model. Several variables tap the competitiveness of the Senate race. The first is a ranking by *Congressional Quarterly*, which characterizes each race’s competitiveness prior to election day. This ex ante measure of aggregate uncertainty ranges from 0 to 3, with 0 indicating an uncompetitive race and 3 indicating a very competitive race. This variable has a mean of 1.5 and a standard deviation of 1.2. Since a higher value indicates a more competitive race, we expect CQ’s ranking to be positively related to issue convergence.¹⁰

¹⁰Data on race competitiveness come from rankings published by CQ Weekly on October 24, 1998 (2870–71); October 21, 2000 (2463–64) and October 26, 2002 (2792–93). In 1998, “highly vulnerable” seats were coded 3, “vulnerable” seats were coded 2,

Our second measure of competitiveness is total spending per eligible voter in the race as reported by the Federal Election Commission.¹¹ Total spending per eligible voter is expressed in millions of dollars. The average spent on these Senate campaigns was \$12 million (with a standard deviation of \$14 million). Of course, high spending does not indicate a competitive race if the large majority of expenditures is by one candidate. Thus, we control for the difference in total spending per eligible voter between the candidates as well.

We also include negativity of the campaign, which is measured as the proportion of a campaign’s total ad airings that are coded as attack ads by coders.¹² As Table 3 shows, the proportion of a campaign’s total ad airings that were negative varies dramatically across states and years, from over 0.55 in the 2000 Ashcroft–Carnahan race in Missouri and the 1998 Hollings–Inglis race in South Carolina, to 0 in 12 other campaigns.

The final campaign-specific variables included are the heterogeneity of the state and the year of the campaign. Following the lead of Lee and Oppenheimer (1999), who review the various approaches to measuring political heterogeneity, we operationalize the former as the natural log of the state’s voting-age population in millions.¹³ The year-specific binary variables are included to control for any time-specific exogenous shocks to the campaigns.

Issue-Level Predictors

Several issue-specific factors may help to predict how much issue-level convergence occurs in a particular campaign. As discussed earlier, candidates may be more likely to engage in discourse with their opponents when the issue is not “owned” by either party. Issue ownership occurs when a party develops a “reputation for policy and pro-

“potentially vulnerable” seats were coded 1, and “probably secure” seats were coded 0. In 2000 and 2002, races with “no clear favorite” were coded 3, races that “lean Democrat” or “lean Republican” were coded 2, races with one candidate “favored” were coded 1, and “safe seats” were coded 0.

¹¹Money spent by candidates other than the Democratic and Republican nominees are not included in these figures.

¹²Ads were coded into three categories: promotional, attack, and contrast. The question posed to coders was: In your judgment, is the primary purpose of the ad to promote a specific candidate (“In his distinguished career, Senator Jones has brought millions of dollars home. We need Senator Jones.”), to attack a candidate (“In his long years in Washington, Senator Jones has raised your taxes over and over. We can’t afford six more years of Jones.”) or to contrast the candidates (“While Senator Jones has been raising your taxes, Representative Smith has been cutting them.”)? See Ridout et al. (2003) for more details on intercoder reliability tests.

¹³These data come from the 2000 U.S. Census.

TABLE 3 Percentage of Negative Ads by Campaign

State	Year	%	State	Year	%	State	Year	%
AR	98	0.21	CA	00	0.15	AL	02	0.00
CA	98	0.34	CT	00	0.41	AR	02	0.00
CO	98	0.25	DE	00	0.47	CO	02	0.00
CT	98	0.39	FL	00	0.29	GA	02	0.45
FL	98	0.12	GA	00	0.41	IA	02	0.28
GA	98	0.22	IN	00	0.16	ID	02	0.00
IL	98	0.34	MD	00	0.00	IL	02	0.00
IN	98	0.05	ME	00	0.06	KY	02	0.27
KY	98	0.50	MI	00	0.43	LA	02	0.00
LA	98	0.20	MN	00	0.31	ME	02	0.04
MD	98	0.02	MO	00	0.55	MN	02	0.12
MO	98	0.36	MS	00	0.00	MO	02	0.07
NC	98	0.28	NE	00	0.22	NC	02	0.12
NV	98	0.12	NJ	00	0.23	NH	02	0.45
NY	98	0.25	NM	00	0.00	NJ	02	0.29
OR	98	0.26	NV	00	0.30	NM	02	0.07
SC	98	0.55	NY	00	0.25	OK	02	0.38
WA	98	0.30	PA	00	0.08	OR	02	0.22
WI	98	0.51	RI	00	0.13	SC	02	0.35
			TN	00	0.00	TN	02	0.10
			TX	00	0.00	TX	02	0.10
			UT	00	0.03			
			VA	00	0.48			
			WA	00	0.37			
			WI	00	0.00			

gram interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere and committed to doing something about them” (Petrocik 1996, 826).

Thus, a Republican candidate is unlikely to talk much about the environment, an issue which the electorate views Democrats as best able to handle, and a Democratic candidate is unlikely to speak much about fighting crime, an issue that citizens perceive Republicans as best able to handle. This argument suggests that it is the issues for which no party has clear ownership where one will likely see the most dialogue.

In his effort to explain variation in campaign dialogue, Simon (2002) also controls for the extent to which an issue is “critical” (i.e., the salience of an issue), and whether the issue is consensual or not. Candidates may be more likely to engage in dialogue on salient, or “critical” issues. As Kahn and Kenney explain:

When issues such as the state of the economy, or the rising costs of health care, or the high incidence of crime receive extensive media attention, they become more salient to citizens. In these situations, candidates feel compelled to discuss these topics because voters view these issues as especially pressing. [For example, m]edia coverage about the economy was so prevalent in New Hampshire throughout 1992 that any effort to avoid the issue would have been a strategic mistake. . . . (1999, 18-19)

Candidates may also be more likely to engage in dialogue on those issues which everyone agrees are laudable goals. Stokes makes a distinction between position issues and valence issues. Position issues (or nonconsensual issues) refer to issues “that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined” (1996, 170). These are issues on which parties take different positions. The legal availability of abortion or whether restrictions should be placed on gun ownership are classic examples of non-consensual issues. Valence issues, or what we will term consensual issues, by contrast, involve “the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (170).¹⁴ Government integrity is an example of such an issue—all candidates, regardless of party, advocate and want to be associated with government integrity. Unable to identify specific policy solutions, the voters are left with the question of trust in competing parties regarding these issues. Both types of issues are commonly observed in nearly all election campaigns. Thus we expect to observe greater dialogue regarding consensual issues than nonconsensual issues.

Table 4 lists the issues determined to be owned by one of the two parties. We follow the lead of Petrocik (1996) in measuring issue ownership. We collapsed our 43 categories into the categories that Petrocik (1996) defined in the appendix of his article and then used his classifications of issues owned to create our 20 owned issues. Owned issues were coded 1, and all other issues were coded 0.¹⁵

¹⁴The distinction between a consensual and nonconsensual issue is often not clear-cut. Take, for example, the economy. On the one hand, all politicians like to be associated with a growing economy, but the parties often offer different proposals for reaching that end.

¹⁵To test whether our specific measure of ownership might be driving our substantive results, we operationalized issue ownership in a second way. Specifically, we applied Simon’s (2002) criteria to our count of issue mentions to determine which issues were owned by a party. Those issues which had a minimum of 2,000 total mentions and for which the ratio of total Democratic mentions to total Republican mentions was either greater than two or less than one-half

TABLE 4 Issues Owned by Major Parties

Abortion	Government Spending
Affirmative Action	Gun Control
Agriculture	Health Care
Child Care	Homosexuality
Civil Liberties	Medicare
Civil Rights	Poverty
Crime	Social Security
Defense	Taxes
Drugs	Values
Foreign Policy	Welfare

Consensual issues, as previously mentioned, are “more or less goals, and so they are not generally subject for partisan dispute” (Simon 2002, 134). Nonconsensual issues, by contrast, concern topics on which parties put forth and advocate different positions. Table 5 lists the 12 issues deemed consensual in character. Consensual issues were coded 1; the remaining issues were coded 0.¹⁶

The salience of the issue in the general public should also be positively related to issue convergence. Issue salience is gauged by an analysis of several CBS News polls taken in 1998, 2000, and 2002. All the surveys were conducted in the first eight months of their respective years, so that the measure reflects preelection salience of the issues. Respondents were asked: “What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?” CBS then coded their open-ended responses into a variety of categories, which we subsequently collapsed into our more streamlined system of categorization. The salience variable, then, is the total number of mentions of each issue by campaign, weighted by the number of respondents per survey.¹⁷

were defined as owned by a party. Using this classification, 11 issues were determined to be “owned:” abortion, gun control, civil rights, incumbent president, constituent service, special interests, corporate fraud, trade, drugs, welfare, government spending. Using this alternative measure had no substantive impact on our results.

¹⁶Two of the authors independently coded each of the issues as consensual or nonconsensual. In the two instances in which they disagreed, they talked about the coding before arriving at a consensus.

¹⁷Our salience data come from several CBS News and CBS News/New York Times survey questions from 1998, 2000 and 2002 that are archived at the Roper Center, University of Connecticut. The 11 specific questions used were USCBS.010702, R02; USCBS.051502D, R02; USCBSNYT.071702, R03; USCBSNYT.021600, R02; USCBS.032700, R02; USCBSNYT.072400, R13; USCBS.080700, R13; USCBS.082100, R13; USCBSNYT.012698, R06; USCBSNYT.011598, R02; and USCBSNYT.022398, R04.

TABLE 5 Consensual and Nonconsensual Issues

Consensual Issues	
Biography	Performance in office
Campaign finance reform	Personality
Constituent service	September 11
Corporate fraud	Special interests
Government ethics	Values
Integrity	Veterans
Nonconsensual Issues	
Abortion	Foreign policy
Affirmative action	Government spending
Agriculture	Gun control
Child care	Health care
Civil liberties	Homosexuality
Civil rights	Ideology
Corporations	Immigration
Crime	Incumbent president
Death penalty	Medicare
Defense	Poverty
Defense/foreign policy	Social security
Drugs	Taxes
Economy	Tobacco
Education	Trade
Energy	Welfare
Environment	

Estimation Issues

To assess the impact of these variables on the extent of campaign dialogue, we estimated a random effects model. Because we have predictor variables from two different units of analysis—the campaign and the issue—we account for the nonindependence of observations within units through the use of this model, which estimates a parameter for within-unit variance. A value of this parameter significantly different from 0 indicates that the homogeneity (i.i.d.) assumption is violated. When this is the case, the random effects model adjusts the structure of the variance-covariance matrix and in doing so provides superior estimates of the coefficients’ standard errors based upon the extent of the within-unit variance relative to the between-unit variance.

We checked for within-unit heterogeneity at both the campaign and issue levels. In other words, we checked to see if campaigns were similar across issues and if issues were similar across campaigns. The tests for within-unit heterogeneity indicated that campaigns were not similar across issues; however, we found that issues were similar across campaigns—as evident from the fact that σ_e and

ρ are greater than 0 at the $p < 0.01$ level (as reported in Table 6). Ignoring this dependence would have resulted in inflated coefficients and deflated standard errors for the issue-level predictors. Although estimation of the model is more technical than with ordinary least-squares regression, the coefficients and standard errors are interpreted in the same way.

Results

Table 6 reports the estimates from a random effects model predicting the extent of issue convergence on each issue in each race. We begin with a discussion of the campaign-level predictors. The competitiveness of the race, as tapped by the CQ ranking, is a strong and significant predictor of issue convergence. Consistent with our expectations, the more competitive the race, the more issue convergence. In terms of substantive impact, our model predicts that issue convergence is 4.95 points greater for each one-unit increase in competitiveness. Overall, convergence is about 14.84 points greater (on the 0 to 100 scale) in highly competitive races than it is in noncompetitive races.¹⁸ Our results appear to buttress the normative assumption that competitive elections benefit the electorate through more campaign dialogue.

Spending in the race also mattered, and in two distinct ways. First, as total spending per capita in the contest increased, so did issue convergence. Greater financial resources appear to allow candidates to talk more expansively. The magnitude of the effect is quite large. An increase in per capita spending (which ranges from under \$1 to over \$13) of \$1 per eligible voter would result in an increase of 1.64 on the issue convergence scale. The second way in which spending matters is in terms of disparities in spending across competing candidates.

¹⁸This finding is consistent with Simon’s empirical finding that competitiveness has a statistically significant and positive relationship to dialogue. However, Simon is agnostic on the predicted direction of the relationship between competitiveness and dialogue. Simon outlines two alternative explanations for a relationship between competitiveness and dialogue: one that predicts a negative relationship and one that predicts a positive relationship. The hypothesis that predicts a negative relationship specifies that a candidate with little or no chance of winning might behave irrationally by talking about issues for which the opponent is advantaged. Third-party candidates are the extreme example of this behavior. Alternatively, efforts to directly persuade voters may lead candidates to engage in dialogue (though persuasion does not occur in Simon’s model). In the end, Simon does not know what to make of this positive finding since he expects to see dialogue in only three situations: when the mass media create it, during “critical elections” when one issue is overwhelmingly salient among the public, and when, for whatever reason, the candidates behave irrationally.

TABLE 6 Predictors of Issue Convergence

	Coefficient	S.E.	Maximum Effect
Campaign-Level Predictors			
Competitiveness	4.95**	1.19	14.87
Spending/Voter	1.64**	0.65	21.51
Diff. Spending/Voter	-2.39**	0.97	-22.08
Negativity	0.05	0.07	2.62
VAP (logged)	1.99	1.61	7.49
Year 2000	-5.22*	2.83	-5.22
Year 2002	5.32*	2.81	5.32
Issue-Level Predictors			
Consensual	4.58	6.20	4.58
Owned	-4.09	5.67	-4.09
Saliency	0.45**	0.22	15.94
Constant	0.09	5.88	
σ_{μ}	13.07**	1.88	
σ_{ϵ}	30.23**	0.69	
ρ	0.16**	0.04	
Model χ^2 (10)	120.71**		

(**) $p < 0.05$ (*) $p < 0.10$

As the difference in spending (per eligible voter) between competing candidates becomes larger, issue convergence declines. This is intuitively appealing since dialogue depends on the actions of both candidates. If one were to increase the difference in per capita spending by \$1 per voter, the resulting decrease in convergence would be 2.39 points. In sum, more spending encourages campaign dialogue, but that spending must be evenly distributed across both candidates.

We also expected that more negative campaigns would produce more dialogue as candidates would be forced to defend themselves. Campaign negativity, however, was unrelated to issue convergence. Likewise, we suggested that a state's heterogeneity, as tapped by its total voting age population, would reduce the level of issue convergence. Voting age population, however, failed to predict issue convergence. Interestingly, we did find that there were year-specific effects (though they were only statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level). On average, issue convergence was about 5 points less in 2000 than in 1998, but issue convergence was about 5 points greater in 2002 than in 1998. We do not have an explanation for why issue convergence was greater in 2002 than in 1998. An obvious suspect for the year-specific effect in 2000 was the concurrent presidential campaign.

Now we turn to issue-specific predictors of dialogue. For the purpose of comparing the relative power of contemporary democratic theory and issue ownership theory

to account for variance in issue convergence, the key issue-specific predictor is party issue ownership. As noted, we coded the ownership issue to be consistent with Petrocik (1996).¹⁹ Using Petrocik's measure, the coefficient was negative as expected; however, the predictor was not significant at the $p < 0.10$ level. The average level of issue convergence for owned issues is 4.09 percentage points less than for nonowned issues. Our estimated maximum effect of issue ownership is quite small in magnitude and is much less than the maximum effect of competitiveness (4.09 vs. 14.84).²⁰ There is little evidence here to support the predictions of issue ownership theory.

¹⁹We matched the 43 issues within Petrocik's 14 categories in a variety of ways to check to see if this result was robust to our coding. For example, under Petrocik's coding, "education" would be considered an issue not owned by either major party; however, one could make the claim that "education" is owned by the Democratic party. Therefore, we categorized "education" as an owned issue. However, the result was robust—all variants resulted in a parameter estimate that was statistically insignificant at the $p < 0.10$ level.

²⁰One reviewer pointed out that a problem with using Petrocik's definition of ownership is that his data are from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and party ownership of certain issues may have changed by the 1998–2002 period, which we are examining. We thus create an alternative measure of ownership following the approach used by Simon. Specifically, we use our 1998 data to classify issues as owned or not based on whether one party's candidates mention the issue substantially more than the other party's candidates. Using this definition of ownership, we then reestimated our models using data from 2000 and 2002. The results of the new models are substantively the same: Ownership is an insignificant predictor of

We also controlled for the preelection salience of an issue and whether or not the issue was consensual. Though we expected more issue convergence for consensual issues than nonconsensual issues, this variable failed to predict issue convergence. In contrast, the relationship between salience and issue convergence was statistically significant and in the expected direction. A one-unit increase in the preelection salience of an issue was associated with 0.45 percentage point increase in issue convergence. The substantive effect of preelection salience was relatively large. Salience's maximum effect of 15.94 percentage points was greater than the maximum effect of issue ownership and even slightly greater than the maximum effect of competitiveness (as measured by CQ rankings).²¹

Conclusion

Consistent with democratic theory, competition appears to encourage candidates to adopt similar campaign strategies for the allocation of resources across issues. Furthermore, the more money spent in a campaign, the more the candidates appear to converge to the same campaign strategy for the allocation of resources across issues, controlling for the difference in fiscal resources between the candidates. At least in this way, more campaign spending may be good for the health of a democracy. Not surprising, even after controlling for total spending, the greater the difference in spending between the candidates, the less the candidates focus on the same issues.

issue convergence. We also varied the threshold defining an issue as owned or not (the ratio of one party's issue mentions to the other's), again estimated the models, and found that in no instance was ownership a statistically significant predictor.

²¹The question arises as to whether the results of our analysis would differ meaningfully if we used a dependent variable analogous to Simon's measure of dialogue rather than Sigelman and Buell's measure of issue convergence. The short answer is no. The formula we used for calculating an analogous measure of dialogue was

$$(1 - |(M_{D_i} - M_{R_i}) / (M_{D_i} + M_{R_i})|) * 100 \quad (3)$$

where M_{D_i} and M_{R_i} are the total number of times the Democratic and Republican candidates mentioned a certain issue, i , in ads aired, respectively. In other words, this measure provides a sense of the extent to which the candidates provided the public with a balanced flow of information on an issue. Estimating the identical multivariate model on this new dependent variable, little changes. For example, the coefficient for competitiveness moves from 4.95 to 5.09 and the coefficient for consensual issues changes from -4.09 to -3.32 . The substantive effect of campaign spending per capita decreases by about 10%. The most striking difference between the two sets of analyses is that preelection salience does not have a statistically significant relationship with this analogous measure of dialogue.

It is also worth noting the normative implications of our finding regarding precampaign issue salience. Candidates devote more resources to discussing the more salient issues, even after controlling for whether or not the issue is owned. Thus, like Kahn and Kenney (1999), we find that candidates find it in their interest to discuss the issues which are publicly salient. The more salient an issue in the public mind, the less likely it is for candidates to duck it.

We are not, however, Pollyannas regarding (or apologists for) the state of democracy in the United States. Scholars have long noted the decline in the number of marginal seats in Congress over the past 30 years. Nor is there any indication that the fiscal advantage of incumbents over challengers has declined (rather, just the opposite). Finally, issue convergence does not ensure that citizens are receiving a balanced and useful flow of information. First, high issue convergence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for dialogue (e.g., both candidates may be talking about the economy, but one may be discussing job growth and the other may be discussing inflation). Second, high issue convergence is not a necessary or sufficient condition to ensure a balanced flow of information to the public since both candidates can allocate the same percentage of resources to the same issues, but one candidate could have far more resources than the other.

Issue ownership theory clearly requires further development before it can systematically help us understand campaigns. Simon's model provides little leverage in accounting for the level and variance of issue convergence observed since it results in a corner solution predicting no issue convergence. When we define owned issues in a manner consistent with Petrocik (1996), we find that issue ownership has no statistically significant relationship with the extent of issue convergence.²²

We suspect that issue ownership's failure to account for much variation in issue convergence is due to insufficient attention to the relationship between issue ownership at the party level and issue ownership at the candidate level. Scholars have long noted that candidates may find it in their interest to distance themselves from their party's reputation. Statements and actions of a single politician have little effect on a party's reputation whereas the statements and actions of a single politician can have a large

²²In recent work, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen define an issue as owned by a party if "the issue is tied to groups that are part of the party's coalition" (Appendix I). Obviously, this is quite different from the approach adopted in Petrocik's 1996 article, in which an issue is defined as owned by Party A if a plurality of respondents thought that Party A could do the a better job handling the issue than any other party.

impact on her reputation. Consequently, it is often in the electoral interest of a politician to distinguish her position from that of the party when the party's issue position is unpopular with the politician's constituency (Mayhew 1974). This insight appears to be supported by Sellers's (1998) finding that the probability of a candidate "message" on an issue in a campaign increases substantially if the candidate possesses a record on that specific issue. Taken to its logical extreme, a candidate may wish to talk about an issue owned by the opposition's party if previous statements and actions by the candidate regarding the relevant issue inoculates her from being associated with the disadvantaged party (Arnold 1990).

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