

# Explaining the Paradox of Issue Convergence

*A Closer Look at the Content and Strategy of Campaign Messaging*

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# Motivation: Issue Emphasis and Convergence

How do political candidates choose which issues to emphasize in campaigns?

- Most existing theories about issue emphasis by candidates center around priming strategies, in which candidates primarily address their most favorable issues in order to raise their salience with voters
- While this might explain why competing candidates' issue agendas can differ, they fail to explain why they more often overlap (*issue convergence*)
- I contend that when this occurs, candidates are using strategies other than priming, and propose three alternatives (positioning, appraising, and position-framing) that would explain convergence

# Overview

- To test these proposed alternatives, I introduce new data tracking the specific types of messages used by US Senate candidates when discussing issues on campaign websites
- I show that candidates provide information about their policy positions, discuss their issue-handling competence, and attempt to reframe issues
- Moreover, candidates choose to employ these strategies based on their own characteristics and the opinions of the voters

# The DICE Dataset

The Discussing Issues in Congressional Elections (DICE) dataset provides detailed coding of the campaign websites of more than 200 US Senate candidates between 2002 and 2008.

- Why websites?
  - *Their ubiquity*: Nearly all candidates for federal office post websites, while only a select subset run television ads or give speeches which are made publicly available.
  - *Their weak resource constraints*: Because the marginal cost of adding content to a website is negligible, campaign websites provide a rich amount of content for candidates regardless of their standing or resources.
  - *Their generality*: Because websites are available for anyone to see, they cannot be readily tailored to specific audiences, and therefore serve as proxies for the campaigns' overall issue emphasis strategies.
- These features make it possible to study a broader array of campaigns than was previously feasible, at a level of depth unmatched by existing data.

# Coding Procedures

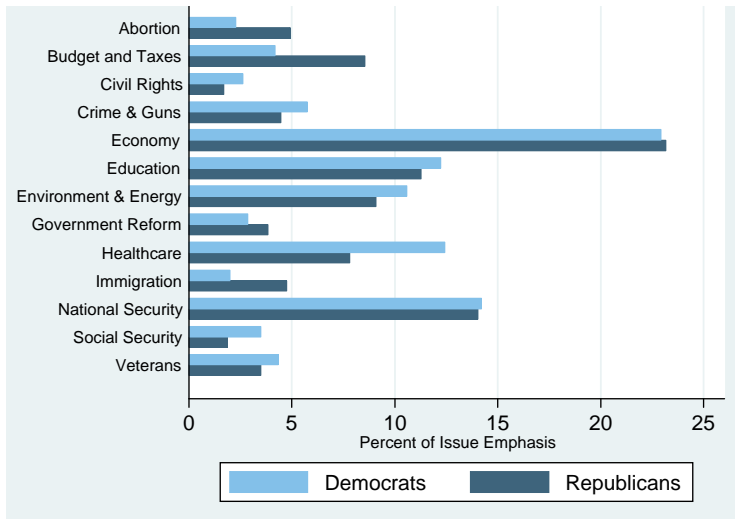
- Team of 7 RAs coded websites from Library of Congress and Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin (2009, 2010) archives
- Looking at the home, candidate biography, and issues pages of each site, coders first note which issues are mentioned and the quantity of content devoted to each
  - 13 issue categories: abortion, budget and tax issues, civil rights, crime and guns, the economy, education, the environment and energy, government reform, healthcare, immigration, national security, Social Security, and veterans' issues
- RAs then coded the specific types of messages used when discussing each issue on each page.
- I use this data to generate measures of the proportion of total emphasis devoted to each issue, how each issue was framed by each candidate, and the amount of substantive content offered by each candidate about their positions and competence

# Types of Messages Coded

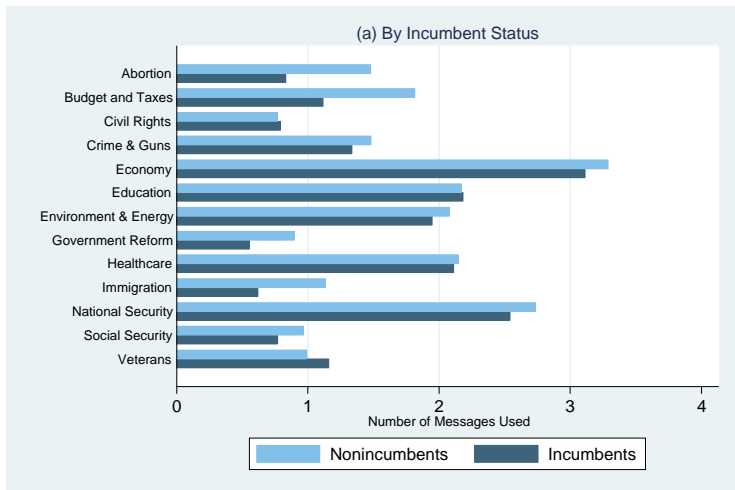
39 message types in total

- Examples: References to candidate's voting record on the issue, statements about the importance of the issue, references to local concerns, candidate endorsements by interest groups
- These individual types of messages are sorted into categories based upon the strategies they could be used to promote
- Informing messages:
  - Positioning messages—relate to policy choices on an issue
  - Appraising messages—refer to the candidates' competence at handling an issue
- Position-framing messages: discuss an issue in terms of policy choices (as opposed to issue-handling competence)
- Other message categories: party-framing, opponent-framing, persuasive, prioritizing

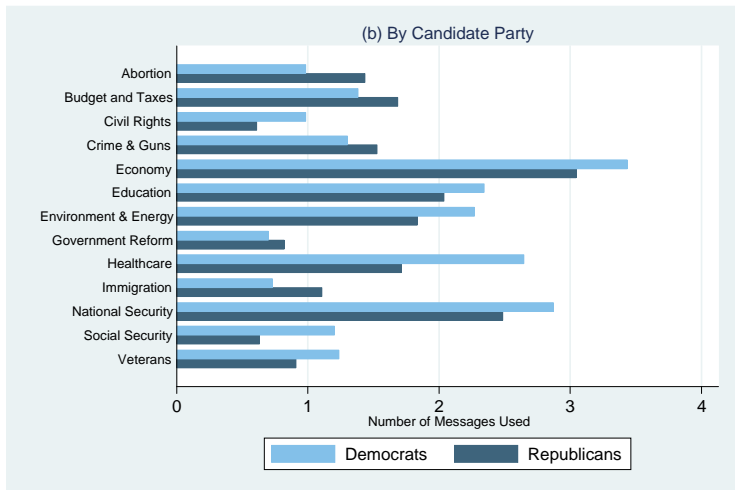
# Emphasis By Each Party's Candidates



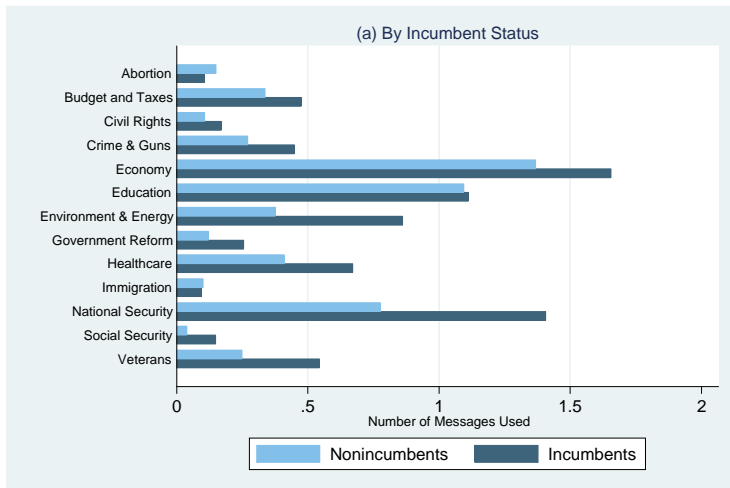
# Positioning Messages by Incumbency



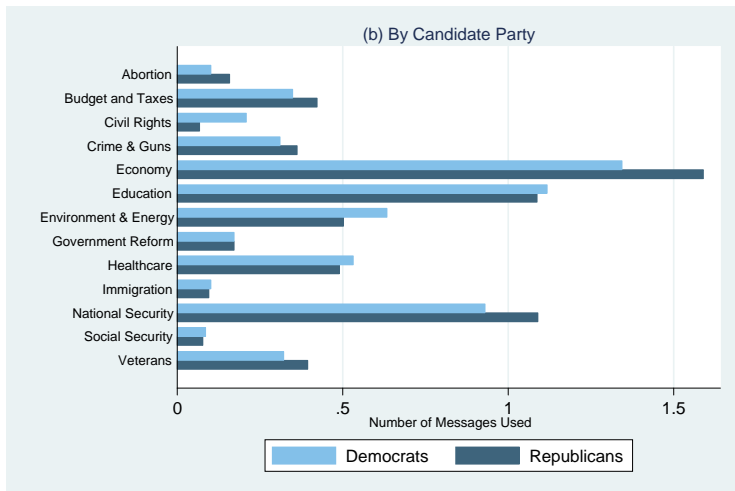
# Positioning Messages by Party



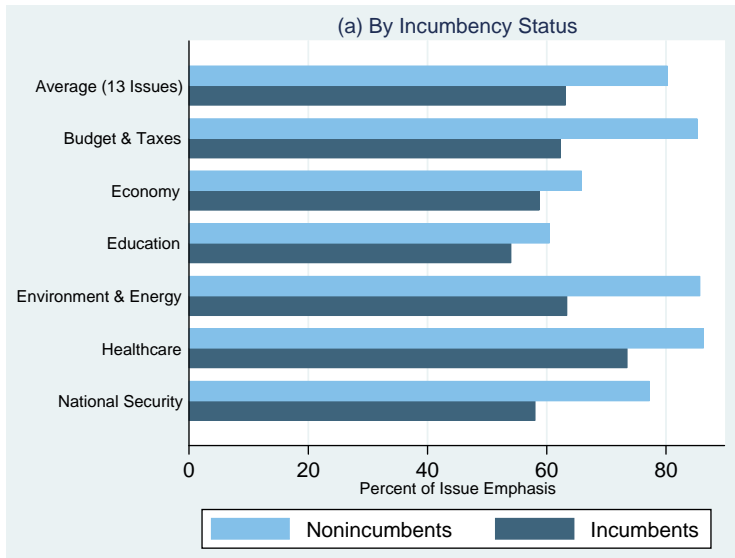
# Appraising Messages by Incumbency



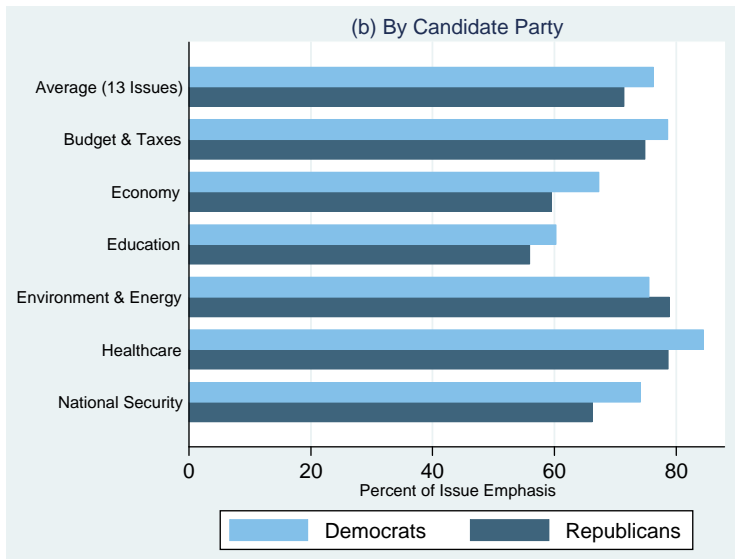
# Appraising Messages by Party



# Position-Framing Messages by Incumbent Status



# Position-Framing Messages by Party



# Initial Findings

Three alternatives to priming—positioning, appraising, and position-framing—tested using multilevel models (grouped by issue, party, and year)

- Informing strategies:
  - Positioning—Democrats provide more information about their positions when voters have liberal preferences on a given issue, while Republicans provide more when voters are conservative
  - Appraising—Incumbents provide the most information about their competence, while their challengers provide the least
- Position-framing strategies:
  - Challengers more likely to frame in terms of positions, while incumbents focus more on competence
  - No significant relationships between position-framing and voters' policy preferences or candidates' PID

# Discussion

- For theories of issue emphasis to accurately depict real campaigns, they must move beyond priming as the sole function of candidates' messages
- The DICE dataset provides an unparalleled opportunity to study the content of these messages in detail
- In this project, I use the data to demonstrate that the “paradox” of issue convergence isn't a paradox at all—it simply indicates the use of strategies other than priming
- Going forward, the dataset will be expanded to include House and gubernatorial campaigns as well, for which existing data is even more scarce
- My ultimate goal is for this dataset to be an essential tool for studying all aspects of campaign issue emphasis