Taking Campaign Strategy Online

Using Candidate Websites to Advance the Study of Issue Emphasis

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

- Nearly all existing theories predict that candidates will emphasize most favorable issues
- Empirical evidence shows that competing candidates often discuss the same issues
- I propose that while candidates may discuss the same issues, they do so in very different ways
- To show this requires better data: not just which issues are discussed, but also how
Overview

- Prevailing Theories of Issue Emphasis
- Alternative Hypotheses
- Benefits of Automated Website Coding
- Coding Walkthrough
- Sample Results
- Discussion
Prevailing Theories of Issue Emphasis

- **Issue Ownership** (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, Petrocik 1996): Candidates emphasize issues on which their parties have better long-term reputations.
- **Positional advantages** (Sellers 1998, Damore 2004, Sides 2006, Hillygus and Shields 2008): Candidates emphasize issues on which their positions are preferred.
- **Performance** (Sellers 1998, Holian 2004, Vavreck 2009): Candidates emphasize issues on which their records or those of their parties’ are particularly good.
- **Common theme** is emphasis of favorable issues to increase salience.
- **Does not account** for evidence of issue convergence (Sigelman and Buell 2004, Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006).
Alternative Hypotheses

- "Riding the Wave" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994): Candidates emphasize salient issues, are punished if not.
- Framing (Holian 2004, Chong and Druckman 2007): Candidates focus voters’ attentions on most favorable issue components
- Voter learning, persuasion, and cueing (implied by other fields): Candidates emphasis issues in order to provide information to voters about themselves or their opponents, or seek to manipulate voter opinion either through argument or partisan cues
Data Requirements

- Previous research mostly based on analyses of news reports, speeches, and TV ads
- Good for telling *which* issues are emphasized, but not so good for *how* they’re emphasized
- Limited quality and quantity of content in an ad or a second-hand report
- Especially a problem for sub-presidential races
- Availability of content across candidates certainly non-random
- Needs: More and better content, useful data on House and Senate races, minimal selection bias
Why Websites Work

The main benefits of using websites as indicators of issue emphasis stems from their low cost:

- Amount of content on a webpage virtually unlimited, not dependent upon resources
- Produced directly by campaign, good proxy for overall emphasis strategy
- Nearly every candidate maintains a site—not only House and Senate, but also state and local
- Since 2002, almost all of these sites archived by Library of Congress
The downside of this bountiful data is that there’s so much of it.

- Thousands of candidate sites, with multiple versions of each
- Site structures vary widely, and some take full advantage of the lack of space limitations
- Most useful dataset produced so far hand-codes sites (see Druckman et al 2010), limited by resource constraints

By using automated text analysis, can include far more races, as well as dynamic analyses of changing emphasis over the campaign season.
To illustrate the process, I code sites of major-party Senate candidates in 2002.

- 31 races, 52 candidates
- Captured October 15 versions of home pages, biographies, issue pages and subpages, news pages, as well as the most recent press releases, speeches, and ad transcripts (979 pages total = average of about 19 pages per candidate)
- Coded emphasis into 4 issue categories (economy, public services, social, and defense)
- Also recorded position/valence framing, party/candidate framing, and levels of detail
Basic steps (coded using Text Classification Tools developed for Pennsylvania Policy Database Project):

1. Collect and organize sites (HTML files)
2. Convert HTML to sentence database
3. Hand-code training data
4. Input training data to build classification model, then automatically classify “virgin” text
5. Weight sentences according to location on page and site, then reaggregate to site level
Began with 519 hand-coded samples; used this training data to classify additional cases; 636 more added via iterative coding process (Moody et al, forthcoming); left with 1155 hand-coded observations out of approximately 35k to be coded.

- Rotating sample to use 1000 training observations to predict other 155:
  - 75.3% PCP for issue categories (58.9% PRE)
  - 67.6% PCP for position/valence framing (44.5% PRE)
  - 82.6% PCP for party/candidate framing (63.3% PRE)
  - 64.0% PCP for level of detail (low/med/high) (39.4% PRE)
Issue Emphasis by Party

Mean Emphasis of Issues by Party
Websites of 2002 US Senate Candidates

Proportion of Emphasis
Economy Public Services Social Issues Defense
DEM REP DEM REP DEM REP DEM REP

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Issue Emphasis by Competing Candidates

Issue Convergence between Competing Candidates

Websites of 2002 US Senate Candidates

b = 0.473

Economy Public Services Social Issues Defense

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Positional and Valence Framing by Competing Candidates

Websites of 2002 US Senate Candidates
0 = All Valence, 1 = All Positional

Positional and Valence Framing by Competing Candidates

\[ b = 0.408 \]

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Candidate and Party Framing

Websites of 2002 US Senate Candidates
Proportion of Content Emphasizing Parties and Party Leaders

Republican Candidate Emphasis

Democratic Candidate Emphasis

Economy
Public Services
Social Issues
Defense

Proportion of Content Emphasizing Parties and Party Leaders

Candidate and Party Framing by Competing Candidates

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Differences in Levels of Detail

Issue Content by Competing Candidates
Websites of 2002 US Senate Candidates
0 = No Detail, 1 = High Detail

GOP Candidate Emphasis
Dem Candidate Emphasis
Economy Public Services Social Issues Defense

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To reiterate: results here are only for illustrative purposes
What they illustrate: potential of automated text analysis to code websites
But much caution needed before going completely hands-off
Even with automation, no magic bullet: lots of work required before data is ready for prime-time
In any case, data not much value without similarly-innovative theory to apply it to.