

Whose Issue Is It Anyway?

**MOVING BEYOND ISSUE
OWNERSHIP TOWARD A BROADER
UNDERSTANDING OF CAMPAIGN STRATEGY**

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THE QUESTION OF ISSUE EMPHASIS

How do candidates choose which issues to emphasize in campaigns?

Issue Ownership Theory (Petrocik 1996): candidates focus on issues “owned” by their parties in order to raise their salience.

- OWNERSHIP DETERMINED BY PARTIES’ REPUTATIONS FOR COMPETENCE
- IN PRACTICE, DETERMINED BY SURVEY QUESTIONS

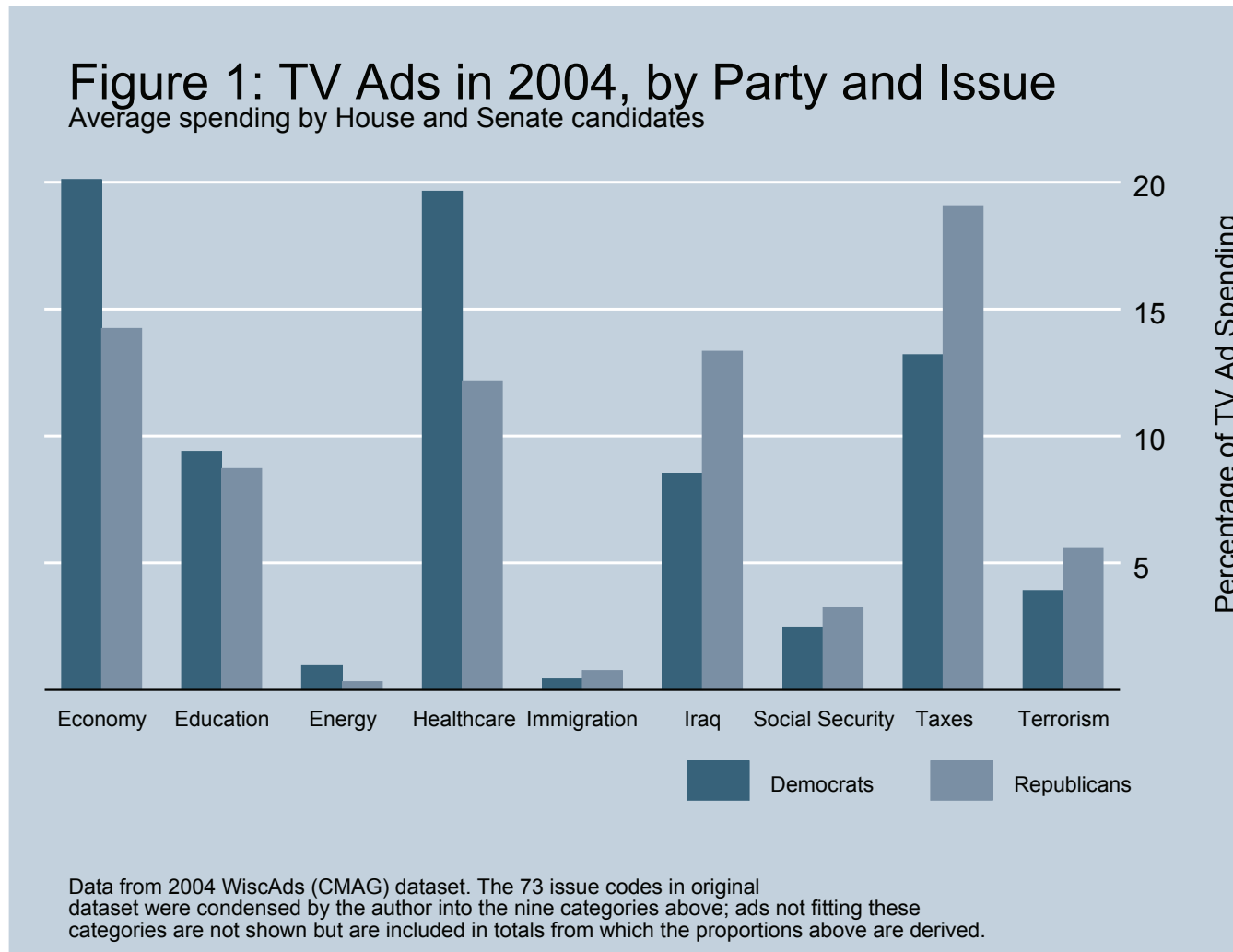
Subsequent research has found other factors which affect the favorability of an issue to a candidate or party, including issue positions and candidate backgrounds.
Most recently:

- HILLYGUS & SHIELDS (2008): PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES EMPHASIZE “WEDGE” ISSUES TO SPLIT OPPONENT’S BASE.
- VAVRECK (2009): IN GOOD ECONOMIC TIMES, INCUMBENT TAKES CREDIT FOR ECONOMY; IN BAD, CHALLENGER ASSIGNS BLAME. IN EITHER CASE, OTHER CANDIDATE TRIES TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT TO AN ISSUE ON WHICH HER POSITION IS MORE FAVORABLE THAN THE OPPONENT’S.

Common theme: Purpose of emphasis is to “prime” voters on favorable issues.

THE DILEMMA OF ISSUE CONVERGENCE

But if candidates mainly prime their most favorable issues, then competing candidates should rarely address the same issues.



THE IMPORTANCE OF ISSUE SALIENCE

*The best predictor of issue emphasis in myriad empirical studies is the degree to which a given issue is **already** salient to voters.*

These findings suggest alternative purposes for issue emphasis beyond priming.

Other possible purposes of issue emphasis are implied in other literatures, but not explored in the context of issue emphasis:

- REPOSITIONING BY CANDIDATES (SPATIAL MODELING)
- REFRAMING OF ISSUES (PUBLIC OPINION)
- PROVIDING INFORMATION TO VOTERS (VOTER BEHAVIOR)

A THEORY OF ISSUE ADVANTAGES

*As a first step in that direction, I propose a new theory of **issue advantages**.*

A candidate's standing on a given issue is based on voters' evaluations of the candidate on a number of issue components.

Components fit into two categories, Positional (subjective) and Valence (objective)

A candidate's overall issue evaluation is the weighted sum of these component evaluations. The differences in issue evaluations between candidates determine the candidates' relative issue advantages.

Three main improvements over existing theories:

1. ADVANTAGES HELD BY SPECIFIC CANDIDATES WITH SPECIFIC VOTERS.
2. CANDIDATES CAN TRY TO INFLUENCE WEIGHTS PLACED ON EACH COMPONENT BY VOTERS.
3. CANDIDATES CAN AFFECT STANDINGS ON SPECIFIC COMPONENTS DIRECTLY.

TESTING THE THEORY

The theory of issue advantages is tested using a question wording survey experiment.

Respondents asked to compare the Democratic and Republican parties on nine issues. Each respondent assigned to one of three question wordings:

1. *TRADITIONAL WORDING:* WHICH PARTY DO YOU THINK **WOULD DO A BETTER JOB HANDLING** EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?
2. *POSITION CUE WORDING:* WHICH PARTY DO YOU THINK **HAS BETTER IDEAS FOR HANDLING** EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?
3. *VALENCE CUE WORDING:* WHICH PARTY DO YOU THINK **IS BETTER QUALIFIED TO HANDLE** EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ISSUES?

If results differ between wordings, two important implications:

1. VOTERS CAN EVALUATE PARTIES (AND PRESUMABLY CANDIDATES) ON MULTIPLE COMPONENTS.
2. THE WEIGHTING OF THESE COMPONENTS CAN BE EXTERNALLY MANIPULATED.

EXPECTATIONS

These findings would support the theory of issue advantages as a potent framework for future research into issue emphasis.

To merely observe differences in the results between wordings would not be sufficient, however. To uphold this specific theory, the differences need to be systematic.

If the theory of issue advantages is correct, we should observe the following behaviors:

- THE POSITION CUE WORDING WILL PRODUCE RESULTS WHICH REFLECT THE RESPONDENTS' PREFERENCES MORE THAN THE OTHER WORDINGS' RESULTS.
- THE VALENCE CUE WORDING WILL PRODUCE RESULTS WHICH REFLECT PARTY-LEVEL FACTORS (UNRELATED TO RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS) MORE THAN THE OTHER WORDINGS' RESULTS.
- ABSENT ANY CUE (THE TRADITIONAL WORDING), RESPONDENTS WILL BASE THEIR ANSWERS MORE ON THEIR OWN PARTISANSHIP AS A DEFAULT RESPONSE THAN OTHERWISE.

OVERALL RESULTS

The overall results show a significant difference between the traditional wording and the valence cue wording, but the position cue wording's results are unchanged.

Percentage of respondents preferring Republicans on each issue

Issue	Traditional Wording	<i>Alternate Wordings</i>	
		Position Cue	Valence Cue
Economy	34.4	33.2	40.9
Education	29.7	30.7	38.0*
Energy	36.7	40.7	46.2**
Healthcare	33.0	33.5	37.4
Immigration	44.1	42.5	52.5
Iraq	45.8	45.9	55.9**
Social Security	33.3	34.4	39.2
Taxes	42.7	44.6	53.9**
Terrorism	55.9	56.8	65.9**
All issues	39.5	40.4	47.9***
<i>n</i>	220	183	207

MODELING RESPONDENTS' PREFERENCES

Given the predictability of responses, an individual-level model is necessary to discern the question wordings' effects.

I first pool the results across issues and question wordings for all respondents. In this model, party preferences on issues are predicted by three sets of explanatory variables:

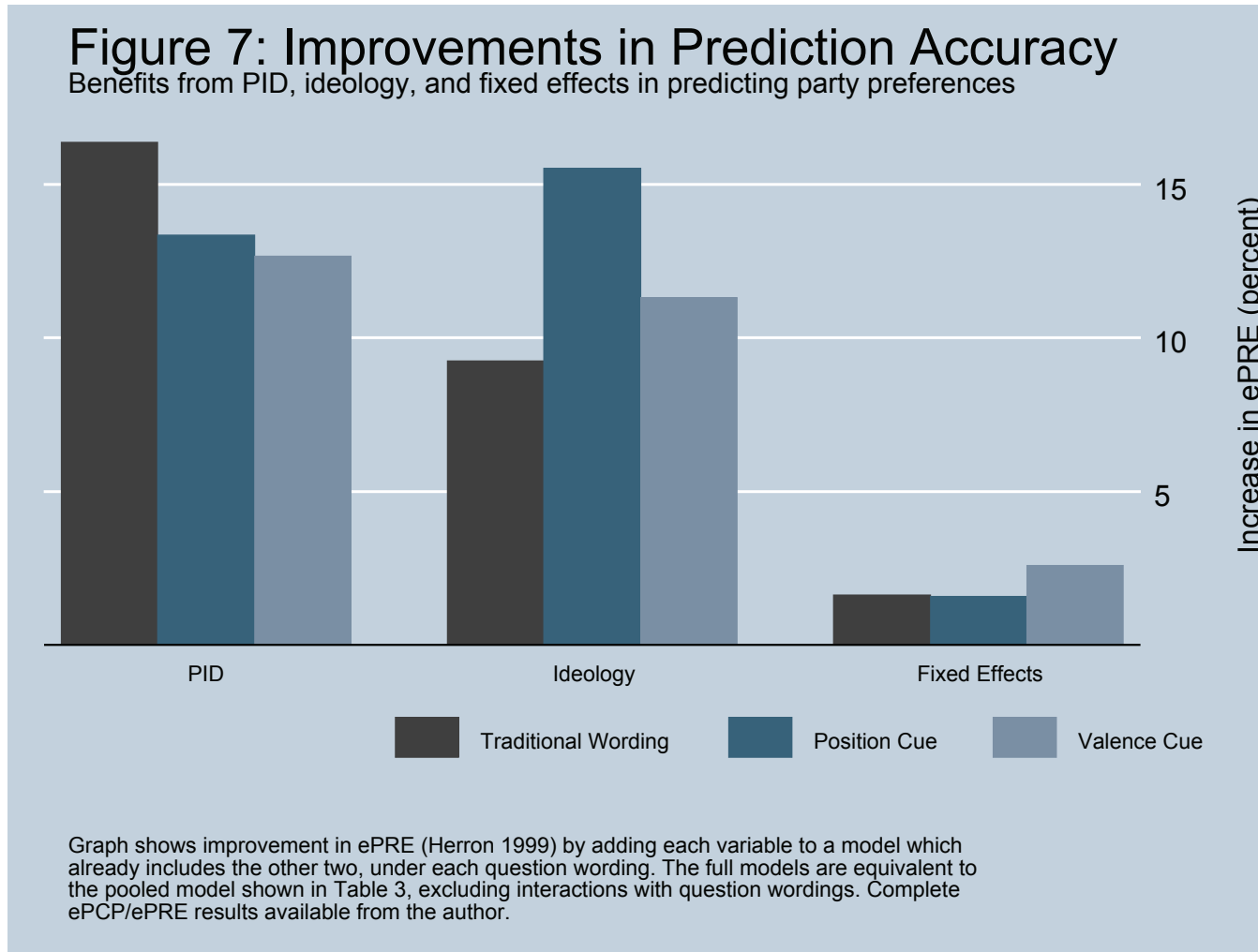
1. RESPONDENT IDEOLOGY
2. RESPONDENT PARTISANSHIP (DUMMIES FOR REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS)
3. FIXED EFFECTS FOR EACH ISSUE

Each of these variables is interacted with each question wording, producing the following results:

- IDEOLOGY HAS THE LARGEST EFFECT (CONSERVATIVES ARE MOST LIKELY TO PREFER REPUBLICANS) UNDER THE POSITION CUE WORDING
- THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FIXED EFFECTS IS GREATEST UNDER THE VALENCE CUE.
- WHILE THE EFFECT OF DEMOCRATIC PID DOES NOT SIGNIFICANTLY VARY ACROSS WORDINGS, REPUBLICAN PID HAS THE GREATEST EFFECT UNDER THE TRADITIONAL WORDING.

COMPARING MODEL FIT

Creating separate models for each question wording, I then compare the significance of each set of variables across question wordings.



CONCLUSIONS

These findings provide significant support for the theory of issue advantages as a framework for future research into issue emphasis.

The implications of these findings apply to a number of areas:

- SURVEY RESEARCH: PROVIDING CUES CAN HELP MITIGATE OVERWHELMING EFFECT OF PARTISANSHIP.
- ISSUE EMPHASIS: THERE ARE PLAUSIBLE PURPOSES FOR ISSUE EMPHASIS OTHER THAN PRIMING.
- VOTE CHOICE: IF VOTERS CONSIDER MORE THAN ONE COMPONENT OF ISSUES, SO SHOULD WE.

Future Research:

- DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF ISSUE EMPHASIS WHICH EXPLORES WHAT CANDIDATES CAN DO BESIDES PRIMING.
- TESTING THE EXTENT TO WHICH CANDIDATES RECOGNIZE AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE OPPORTUNITIES.
- EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF THESE ALTERNATIVES ON VOTERS AND ELECTIONS.