Whose Issue Is It Anyway?

A New Look At Party Reputations and Candidate Evaluations

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ABSTRACT: What makes an issue good for a candidate to emphasize? According to proponents of issue ownership theory, parties' reputations for competence are the main determinant, while policy positions are irrelevant. Yet in practice, a single survey question has been used to assess issue ownership, and it has never been clear what precisely this question really measures. I propose an alternative theory of *issue advantages* in which voters consider both positions and competence when evaluating parties on issues, and present results from a survey experiment fielded after the 2008 election to support this framework. These results show that, contrary to longstanding belief, the traditional issue ownership question actually reflects parties' positions more than their competence. After first analyzing how voters evaluate parties, I then explore the role of party reputations in evaluations of individual candidates, using original survey data on views of House members in 2010. My findings show that while party labels do matter to evaluations, they are mainly used by sophisticated voters in the absence of candidate-specific information. I conclude with a discussion of the paper's implications for theories of campaign issue emphasis.

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1 Introduction

As American political campaigns have become more sophisticated over the past half-century, the study of campaign strategy by political scientists has taken on an increased level of importance. Among the aspects of strategy that researchers have considered, issue emphasis—the choice by candidates of which issues to discuss in campaigns—has been among the most studied and the most controversial. Of the various theories introduced to explain why candidates prefer to talk about certain issues over others, the most dominant by far has been Petrocik's (1996) theory of issue ownership. And yet the fundamental assumptions of issue ownership theory—about how voters evaluate parties on issues and how those evaluations carry over onto individual candidates—have never been tested empirically.

In simple terms, issue ownership theory stipulates that political parties have advantages on certain "owned" issues, based on their reputations for competence in handling those issues. By emphasizing these issues in campaigns, the party's candidates can raise those issues' salience in the minds of voters, and thereby tilt the electoral odds in their favor. But in the years since issue ownership was introduced, myriad studies have shown that it can account for only a small fraction of candidates' issue emphasis strategies at best, and also pointed out its inability to explain why competing candidates would ever discuss the same issues.

In this paper, I argue that the limitations of issue ownership are due to a flawed understanding of how voters process issues. As an alternative, I propose a theory of "issue advantages" in which voters evaluate parties on their policy positions as well as their competence at handling issues. A voter's overall evaluation of a party on a given issue is determined by combining these two components, with the weights assigned to each allowed to vary across individuals and issues. Issue advantages are the product of aggregating these evaluations across the electorate. Rather than reflecting a vague notion of party reputations, assessing issue advantages is instead a method for summarizing the myriad attitudes of voters towards parties on a given issue. In essence, I argue that issue advantages are a useful shorthand for *describing* public opinion, rather than a fundamental construct which *dictates* it (as issue ownership is presumed to be).

I support this theory with evidence from a survey experiment included in the 2008

Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This experiment tests alternate wordings of the traditional issue ownership survey question, to better understand how voters evaluate parties on issues, and demonstrates that voters consider parties' positions as well as their competence when making their evaluations. While this finding will come as no surprise to those who study public opinion, it exposes the limitations of issue ownership and suggests a better-fitting alternative.

I then turn to the question of how voters' evaluations of parties on issues influence their evaluations of individual candidates on those issues, bringing in original data on views of House members in 2010. While the theory of issue ownership conceives of party labels as providing guidance about individual candidates' competence, I demonstrate that they serve the same function with regard to positions. I then go on to show how the individual characteristics of candidates and voters both influence the evaluation process directly and also moderate the effects of party labels.

These results suggest that the concept of issue ownership as a primary determinant of issue voting is dramatically overstated. Instead, party labels serve merely as shortcuts used by sophisticated voters in the absence of candidate-specific information. Far from being a uniform feature of the party system, the effects of candidates' party labels can vary widely based on the voters' own opinions and knowledge, and these effects are diminished as voters learn more about the individual candidates themselves.

In addition to clarifying how voters evaluate candidates and parties, the paper's findings also carry with them major implications for theories of issue emphasis. Issue ownership theory declares that the favorability of an issue for a candidate is based on a single factor—her party's reputation for competence—which is ultimately beyond her control. But my findings suggest a different reality: each issue involves multiple considerations for voters, and at least some of these considerations may be influenced by campaigns. By providing the ability for candidates to change their standings on issues, a theory of issue emphasis which incorporated these results would be a major development. Such a theory would not only provide a more accurate account of the strategies seen in real campaigns, but also able to finally explain the "paradox" of issue convergence.

2 Issue Ownership in Theory and Practice

Issue ownership theory is a direct product of several important findings from the literature on vote choice and campaigns. First, in response to Downs's (1957) one-dimensional spatial model, Stokes (1963) points out that there are multiple dimensions (issues) over which parties compete and voters make their decisions; RePass (1971) then demonstrates that the salience of particular issues is a moderating factor in determining vote choice. Budge & Farlie (1983) and Riker (1993) subsequently argue that campaigns revolve largely around attempts to prime voters' issue agendas, rather than persuading voters to change their policy preferences or modifying their own positions to better fit the voters'. Finally, Petrocik (1996) builds on these findings by asserting that the value of an issue to a candidate is based on his party's reputation for competently handling the issue. A party which enjoys a significant reputational advantage over its opponents is therefore said to "own" that issue.

There is no firm consensus about the exact sources of these reputations, however. Petrocik (1996) argues that parties' reputations have both long- and short-term components, reflected in the "constituencies of the parties" and "the record of the incumbent", respectively. But subsequent studies of issue ownership take a more agnostic view. A typical example describes parties' ownership of issues as simply a product of "reputations for their ability to handle certain issues" which "provide candidates with credibility" (Damore 2004).

In practice, however, there seems to be a greater level of agreement on how to measure issue ownership: by using a simple survey question which asks respondents to judge which party would do a better job at "handling" each of a range of issues. Studies of issue ownership which measure it directly—including Petrocik (1996), Petrocik, Benoit & Hansen (2003), Sides (2006), and Egan (2008)—rely on the aggregate results of this question to assign ownership, while the rest—including Ansolabehere & Iyengar (1994), Sellers (1998), Damore (2004), Holian (2006), and Kaplan, Park & Ridout (2006)—assign issues in a deterministic fashion, based largely upon Petrocik's original categorizations.

This question does not, notably, specify how respondents should compare the parties—whether they should focus on parties' reputations, the backgrounds of the parties' candidates, or something else. To a large degree, this vagueness has obviated any pressing need

for a precise definition of issue ownership. As Justice Potter Stewart opined (albeit about a very different subject), while it may be impossible to define, we know it when we see it—and seeing it, in this case, is done by using the results of this survey question. Though we may not be able to specify exactly what *leads* to issue ownership, the thinking goes, we can measure issue ownership *itself*, as a manifest aspect of public opinion.

One critical feature of issue ownership that Petrocik does make clear, however, and that subsequent studies do not dispute directly, is that issue ownership is *not* a product of the parties' positions on these issues.[1] In other words, voters do not choose parties and candidates based on their policy preferences. Regarding the typical voter, Petrocik asserts that she

> "lacks a clear preference about social and policy issues, is normally disinclined to impose thematic or ideological consistency on issues, and inclined to view elections as choices about collective goods and resolving problems, and not about the specifics of the resolution. The key facts for this voter is not what *policies* candidates promise to pursue, but what *problems* (medical care needs, high taxes) will be resolved." (p. 829–830; emphasis in original)

For Petrocik, voters see candidates mainly as potential administrators who, because of party affiliation, offer differing levels of expected performance (in a valence sense) across a range of issues.

This view, unsurprisingly, raises eyebrows among both democratic theorists and proponents of spatial voting models. Subsequent researchers have avoided taking such a strict view of the sources of issue ownership, preferring instead to focus on the empirical manifestation of issue ownership that is reflected in survey respondents' party evaluations. But where issue ownership comes from—whether from parties' reputations, their issue positions, or a combination of these factors—has both theoretical and empirical implications.

The assumption that parties own issues only because of their long-term histories and short-term performance leads to a very limited view of campaign strategy. With these factors as

[1] Sellers (1998), Holian (2004) Sigelman & Buell (2004), and even Petrocik himself (1996) all suggest a role for issue positions in determining issue emphasis, but none of these conceive of positions as contributing to or complementing issue ownership itself. A notable exception is Simon (2002), who develops a model which closely resembles issue ownership, using positions as the basis for voters' evaluations. Simon does not, however, challenge Petrocik's concept of issue ownership specifically.

the main determinants of voters' evaluations, the only avenue for candidates to alter their fates is to divert the voters' attentions away from bad issues and onto more favorable ones. Yet it is clear that candidates attempt to accomplish other goals as well when discussing issues: they provide information about themselves and their opponents, argue in favor of their chosen positions, and reframe issues to highlight more advantageous dimensions (Chong & Druckman 2007, Freedman, Franz & Goldstein 2004, Geer & Lau 2006, Huber & Arceneaux 2007, Lenz 2009). Moreover, the dismissal of positions entirely neglects a vast slice of political science: that which deals with the question of candidate positioning.[2]

But perhaps the most compelling argument against issue ownership theory is the phenomenon of issue "convergence" or "trespassing". A strict interpretation of issue ownership would predict complete divergence of candidates' issue agendas (as only one side can benefit from priming a given issue), but this prediction is routinely contradicted by real campaigns (Sigelman & Buell 2004). Rather, the salience of an issue—because of exogenous concerns, news coverage, or opponent emphasis—is perhaps the most important determinant of the degree to which a campaign chooses to emphasize it (Kahn & Kenney 1999, Damore 2004, Sides 2006, Druckman, Hennessy, Kifer & Parkin 2009). Even Petrocik acknowledges the sway salience holds over campaigns (Petrocik, Benoit & Hansen 2003)—on an issue which is already highly salient, even if it favors the opponent, discussing the issue may often be better than the alternative. But issue ownership theory (and indeed, any other priming-centered theory) fails to produce an explanation for what candidates might be doing in these circumstances.[3] A more inclusive view of how voters evaluate candidates on issues, however, would allow us to explain more of the observed patterns of issue emphasis and justify why competing candidates often discuss the same issues in campaigns.

Finally, from a practical angle, how voters evaluate parties and candidates also matters to those who wish to understand public opinion on issues. The survey question used to assess issue ownership is decidedly vague—what does it mean to say a party can best "handle" an issue? Petrocik's assertions about what this question asks have largely avoided scrutiny thus far, yet at the same time, those in the popular media and pundit class have routinely applied their own interpretations to this now-routine question. Without some knowledge of the underlying

[2]See Osborne (1995) for a review.

[3]See for example Hillygus & Shields (2008) and Simon (2002).

constructs which produce survey responses, their results are all but meaningless, yet that is precisely the situation with this question. Knowing what is really being measured by this question will allow for future researchers to either update their interpretations to match the true underlying construct, or else revise their questions so as to better measure the constructs they are looking for. Either outcome would be a marked improvement in the quality of such research.

3 An Alternative Theory of Issue Advantages

In contrast to Petrocik's theory, I propose an alternative theory of *issue advantages* in which voters consider both the parties' policy positions and their competence as components of their overall evaluations. When assessing parties on an issue, these components are considered distinctly: the individual holds opinions about the parties' positions in relation to her own, as well as beliefs about their relative levels of competence. The voter also holds her own beliefs about the relative importance of each factor across issues; while on one issue, she may be unconcerned with specific policies and simply want a solution administered competently, on another issue she may be highly concerned about the policy implemented.[4] When called upon to evaluate the parties on an issue (say, in response to a survey question), the individual weights each component accordingly and averages them to determine her preference.

This framework then leads to a very different idea of how voters form their evaluations. Issue ownership is a party-level phenomenon; issues are Republican or Democratic, regardless of the candidate representing the party or the constitutents being appealed to. But my alternative posits candidates' advantages to be an aggregation of voters' individual evaluations, which vary based on the voters' policy preferences and the candidates' characteristics. As such, the favorability of issues to candidates depends upon the context: while Republicans hold advantages on most social issues in Mississippi, they are be at a severe disadvantage in Massachusetts. Rather than being a static phenomenon, issue advantages are merely a way to summarize the relative standings of candidates and parties in a particular election. It would be absurd, in this framework, to follow the lead of Petrocik, Benoit & Hansen (2003) and declare the same

[4]Some issues lend themselves naturally to one or the other pole: corruption is mainly thought of in terms of competence (everyone wants less of it), while abortion is overwhelmingly about positions. To the degree that this weighting varies across issues, the distinction can be thought of as a continuous version of Stokes's (1963) dichotomy of position and valence issues.

advantages across all presidential campaigns from 1952 to 2000—not only should the variation across years be taken into account, but it would also be unwise to ignore the varied audiences targeted in each campaign.

I validate this theory by reexamining the traditional survey question on issue ownership. To find out what the question is really measuring, I conducted a survey experiment as part of the [university name removed for review purposes] module of the 2008 CCES (Ansolabehere 2009)[citation of university module removed].[5] This experiment tested whether a change in the wording of the traditional party evaluation question, cueing respondents to base their responses on either positional or competence considerations, would affect the resulting responses.

Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of three groups and asked to evaluate parties on nine issues. A different wording of the question was presented to each group, with the ordering of issues and parties randomized:

1. *Traditional wording*: For each of the following issues, please tell us whether you think the Republicans or the Democrats **would do a better job of dealing with** that issue

2. *Position cue wording*: For each of the following issues, please tell us whether you think the Republicans or the Democrats **have better ideas and policies regarding** that issue

3. *Competence cue wording*: For each of the following issues, please tell us whether you think the Republicans or the Democrats **are better qualified to handle** that issue[6]

By comparing the responses to the traditional question to the responses from the alternate wordings, I investigate how respondents generate their answers to the traditional question.[7]

[5]The CCES is a nationally-representative, internet-based panel survey which includes a main section of common content and additional modules designed by participating researchers. In our module, 823 respondents participated in the post-election wave, which included these questions. More information about the sample design, response rates, and original data are available at http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/.

[6]I choose to use the "better qualified" phrasing (instead of "more competent" or something similar) because it straightforwardly prompts respondents to evaluate the parties on their respective abilities, rather than assuming that they define "competence" as we do (that is, as something independent of positions).

[7]Though in the ideal case we would have responses to all three questions from every respondent—so that we could see how individual respondents distinguish between evaluation criteria—this approach would bring its own set of problems. While some respondents might feel prompted to have their answers be consistent across criteria, others might feel compelled to make more distinct evaluations than they would otherwise employ. With random assignment to treatments, the results from each question wording are (in expectation) equivalent to the results that would have been produced if the same set of respondents provided answers to all three questions *and* those answers were independent of one another.

To guide the analysis of these results, I first distinguish between the process by which voters evaluate parties on issues and the process by which they respond to these survey questions. In accordance with my proposed theory, voters hold coherent opinions of the parties on particular issues in terms of both positions and competence, and they incorporate both of these into survey responses. But party identification is undoubtedly a major factor in survey responses as well, both by playing the role of the default choice and because individuals' evaluations of parties and their own partisanship are potentially linked in both directions (with partisanship influencing opinions and beliefs about issues, and vice versa). In answering these questions, respondents therefore combine each of these three considerations—opinions about parties' positions, the parties' reputations for competence, and the respondents' own party identification—and the weighting of each consideration determines its influence on the ultimate result. Thus for the individual i on issue j, her party preference when asked in a survey (with positive values favoring Democrats) is the weighted (by ω) average of her positional evaluations of the parties, their reputations for competence, and her party identification:

$$\begin{aligned} PartyPreference_{ij} &= \omega_{ij1}(PosEval_{ij,D} - PosEval_{ij,R}) \\ &\quad + \omega_{ij2}(CompRep_{ij,D} - CompRep_{ij,R}) + \omega_{ij3} PID_i \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

This preference, a continuous variable, is finally converted into a categorical survey response by the respondent.[8]

I assume that voters have some prior distribution of the weights they place on each considerations for each issue before taking the survey, which may vary between respondents but which is equivalent across question wordings (because of randomization). Each of the alternate wordings then provides a cue to the respondent, to give a greater weight to either positions or competence in their response than they would absent the cue.[9]

To analyze the results, then, I look to see the relationship between each of these three considerations and the results of each question wording. Though the considerations themselves

[8] In the models which follow, the cutoffs used in creating the categorical response are assumed not to vary across respondents.

[9] Assuming that the added weight on each of these components is taken from both the other component and party identification, the traditional wording is in effect cueing on party identification, since its weight is expected to be higher for the traditional wording than with either of the cues.

are surely correlated, the effect of each variable across question wordings should reflect its weighting by respondents in each sample. While compiling data on party identification is straightforward, estimates of respondents' positional and competence evaluations of parties are of course much harder to come by. Though we would ideally be able to control for individuals' positions on each issue separately, by adding the assumption that individuals' issue positions are highly correlated within and across issues, we can use respondents' self-reported ideology as a proxy.[10] Because party competence is *not* dependent upon respondent characteristics, however, it should not vary across respondents (only across issues) and thus can be estimated by employing fixed effects for each issue. These fixed effects will account for any trends in party ealuations across issues that do not depend upon individual voters' characteristics—exactly the sort of variation issue ownership theory is based upon.

The aggregate results of the survey are presented in Table 1. This table shows the percentage of respondents who reported a preference for the Republicans on each issue, out of those who expressed a preference for either party, across all three question wordings.[11] The traditional question's results echo the findings in Petrocik (1996) and myriad other studies and polls: Democrats are rated highest on education, healthcare, and Social Security, while Republicans' best issues are taxes, terrorism, and the Iraq war. But interestingly, only on the issue of terrorism are the Republicans preferred by a majority of respondents—in the context of issue ownership theory, this would appear to leave the Republicans with very little to talk about during the campaign.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The second and third columns show responses to the alternate question wordings. The results from the position cue wording are indistinguishable from those of the traditional wording; they are not significantly different for any issue, and across all issues, the difference in preference is less than one percent (also not significant). But the competence cue's responses are another story altogether. For five of the nine issues tested, this wording produced significantly different

[10] One other assumption employed here is that the Democratic party holds a more liberal position than the Republicans on each issue—a modest assumption, especially given that the positions of the parties in large part define what makes a position "liberal" or "conservative" in the U.S.

[11] For ease of presentation, these results exclude respondents who express indifference between the parties; results including all responses (available from the author) also show significant differences between results from the traditional wording and those from both alternate wordings.

results from those produced by the traditional wording, and on three of these issues the differences are ten percentage points or greater. Across all issues, the difference is greater than eight points and highly significant.

The next step is to employ regressions to separate out the effects of the three proposed considerations (partisanship, positional evaluations, and competence reputations) on responses to each question wording. I first look at the magnitude and statistical significance of each variable or set of variables (party identification, ideology, and fixed effects for each issue) in models predicting party preferences on all nine issues, for each of the three question wordings.[12] The party identification variables are used to account for variation in responses based solely on PID, either as a default survey response or because of a potentially-reciprocal attachment (wherein voters affiliate with parties because they agree with them and/or judge parties on issues through a partisan lense). The ideology variable captures the correlation between evaluations of parties and respondents' own policy preferences. The fixed effects reflect party characteristics that do not vary across individuals—only across issues—which would include exactly the reputations for competent issue-handling that are the basis for issue ownership theory.

The results shown in Table 2 first run these models separately for each question wording. I then present a single model which pools all three treatment groups, with interaction terms brought in to evaluate the significance of differences in coefficents across wordings.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Looking at the unpooled models, party identification, ideology, and fixed effects are all significant for each question wording. For each group, Democrats were least likely to prefer Republicans on these issues, while Republicans were most likely. As respondents grew more conservative, they also became more likely to prefer Republicans. Finally, for all three wordings, the joint impact of fixed effects for each issue are highly significant.

From the pooled results, the differences between wordings become more clear. We see that

[12] An individual's responses are treated as independent across issues from one another. Though some might question whether individuals employ the same response processes (which would suggest the standard errors given here are too low), this assumption has both theoretical and empirical support. First, we expect that the weights applied to the various components, the ties between ideology and party policies, and the voters' perceptions of competence should all be different between issues. In addition, the survey produces substantial variation in individuals' responses across issues, with only a third of respondents preferring the same party on every issue. For both these reasons, it would be incorrect to treat an individual's responses across issues as simply repeated measurements of the same variable.

while the effects of Democratic affiliation do not vary significantly between wordings, Republican affiliation has a significantly larger effect under the traditional wording (the base category in the pooled model) then under either the position or competence cue wordings—that is, Republicans answering the traditional question were significantly more likely to give responses consistent with their partisanship than those who were given either cue. The effects of ideology under the position cue, meanwhile, are significantly larger than under the other two wordings; conservative respondents became more likely to prefer Republicans, and liberals less likely, with the position cue than without it. And the significance of fixed effects for issues is highest with the competence cue, with the Wald statistic for that wording's fixed effects more than double that of the traditional wording's.[13]

An alternative approach for displaying the impact of each factor under the different wordings is to test their effects on model fit. Figure 1 shows the improvements in the prediction accuracy contributed by each factor under each question wording in the unpooled models, using Herron's (1999) expected percent reduction in error (ePRE) measure. The increases shown are the differences between restricted models, which exclude each of the three sets of variables in turn, and a full model which includes all variables. Echoing the results found previously, the impact of party identification is greatest for the traditional wording, while ideology's impact is greatest with the position cue and fixed effects have the greatest impact with the competence cue. This graph makes especially clear the minimal differences in responses between issues; while partisanship and ideology both have average effects of more than 10%, fixed effects contribute only a quarter of that amount even in the best case. These results show that despite the apparent differences between issues shown in Table 1, whether an issue helps or hurts a given party is hardly uniform across voters.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

So what do these findings ultimately mean for the proposed theory of issue advantages? There are two main points to be taken from these results. First, the cues used in the alternate wordings do appear to tap into their intended considerations, which suggests both that evaluations of parties on issues are indeed weighted combinations of these considerations and that

[13]Results which also account for indifferent responses (available upon request) show a similar pattern as those shown in this section.

voters can be prompted to adjust those weights with outside stimuli (suggesting a role for campaign messages or other events). Second, responses to the traditional question wording are distinctly different from those produced by the competence cue, but the process which produces them appears to combine elements of both positional and competence considerations. In the following section, I extend these findings to investigate how party labels affect evaluations of individual candidates.

4 How Do Party Labels Affect Candidate Evaluations?

Issue ownership theory was originally developed as an explanation for campaign strategy. According to Petrocik (1996), perceptions of candidates' competence were primarily driven by the reputations of the candidates' parties. But given what the previous results demonstrated about how voters evaluate *parties* on issues, this raises the question of what role party labels play in evaluations of *individual candidates*.

To investigate this, I employ original survey data from the [university name removed] module of the 2010 CCES study (pre-election wave, $n = 1000$).[14] In these questions, respondents are asked the degree to which they approve or disapprove of the votes cast by their House member during the previous term, with regard to three separate issues: financial regulation, healthcare reform, and climate change and energy policy. These issues were chosen because of the availability of both roll call voting records for members as well as questions in the common content section of the survey which asked respondents how they would have voted on the same bills. Respondents are then asked to rate the qualifications of their representatives on the same three issues.

The first test looks to see the impacts of the member's party identification on each type of evaluation. Respondents' evaluations are given on a five-point scale, and these skills are treated as continuous in linear regression models. These models also control for party affect (indicator variables for whether the respondent identifies with the same party as the member or the opposing party), as well as respondents' age, education, and income. Separate regressions are run

[14]Note to reviewers: This data has not yet been publicly released by the principal investigators, and as such some details about the survey (e.g., response rates) are not currently available. The design of the overall study is comparable to that done in 2008, however, and exact details should be available before publication. If necessary for review purposes, please let me know and I can try to obtain them earlier, but the results in this paper are ultimately not dependent upon having representative samples.

for each issue. According to my theory of issue advantages, voters hold beliefs about the parties' positions and competence, and these beliefs should reflect upon candidates who identify with each party. As such, I expect candidates' party labels to have a significant effect on respondents' evaluations of candidates' voting records and qualifications.

The results of these models for both types of evaluations are presented in Table 3. Across evaluations of both votes and qualifications, Democratic members are rated significantly more negatively than Republicans. The magnitude of these differences ranges from 0.30 to 0.43 on a scale of 1 to 5, which corresponds to a drop of 8 to 11%. (These estimates are produced by dividing the relevant OLS coefficients by the range of the scale—4 points, from 1 to 5—so that percentage estimates reflect the extent of change relative to the scale's boundaries.) This is strong confirmation of the prediction above: party labels have a substantial effect on both types of candidate evaluations, and on these three issues in 2010, that effect strongly favors the Republicans.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

4.1 Individual Preferences and Vote Evaluations

I next investigate the role of individual policy preferences in moderating the effects of party labels on vote evaluations. The results in the previous section strongly supported the notion that individual preferences affect evaluations of parties on issues, and we would expect to see the same pattern when extended to individual evaluations. Therefore, I expect respondents who share policy preferences with the member representative's party to rate the member higher than those who disagree with that party.

The first, third, and fifth columns of Table 4 add to the model shown in the previous table a variable indicating whether the respondent's policy preference on each issue agrees or disagrees with the position of the member's party on that issue.[15] For each issue, agreement with the member's party has a strong, significant positive effect on evaluations, which translates into an

[15]This variable is coded 1 when the respondent favors that party's position, -1 when the respondent is opposed, and 0 if the respondent did not take a position. Democratic candidates are coded to have their party favoring the financial regulation and healthcare reform bills which were enacted into law, and the climate change legislation which passed the House but not the Senate; Republican candidates are coded with their party opposed to all of these bills.

increase of between 15 and 19 percentage points on average across respondents.[16]

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

This effect, however, is likely picking up on agreement with the positions of individual candidates, since (almost by definition) most party members share their party's position. As such, we should expect that respondents who agree with individual candidate's positions will evaluate those candidates higher than those who disagree. This is indeed shown to be the case in the second, fourth, and sixth columns of Table 4. While still controlling for agreement with parties, these models show that agreement with the positions of individual candidates translate into increased evaluations of between 10 and 22 percentage points.

Importantly, these models do not directly account for respondents' knowledge of their individual candidates' votes, so the effects of agreement (calculated objectively from candidates' voting records and respondents' stated policy preferences) would only be significant if respondents actually knew their members' positions distinctly from those of the parties'. This might explain why the coefficient on agreement with candidates for healthcare reform is more than double that seen for the other two issues: given the divisiveness of this issue leading up to the 2010 elections and the associated media attention, it follows the voters would be more likely to know how their representatives voted on this issue than on others.

These findings tell us that, when known, voters will use individual candidates' votes and positions in making their evaluations; contrary to the original theory of issue ownership, voters do indeed distinguish between candidates and parties. Only in the absence of candidate-specific information, these results suggest, do individuals use their beliefs about the parties' positions to infer those of individual candidates.

4.2 Candidate Characteristics and Perceived Qualifications

Turning to evaluations of members' qualifications, the same questions apply: do candidate characteristics matter to evaluations, and how do these characteristics moderate the influence of party labels? While there is no way to directly estimate candidates' competence in an objective manner (as was done for positions, by comparing respondents' preferences with members' voting

[16] How these percentage estimates are calculated is discussed above, in reference to the previous table.

records), the amount of experience members have in office can be used as an effective proxy. Voters should consider long-serving members more qualified, both because members may become more skilled over time and also because better-qualified representatives are more likely to be reelected. This could especially serve to counteract the effects of party labels: those members who have been around for a long time are perhaps not as susceptible to party stereotypes as those who have not yet proven themselves to voters.

Thus I predict that respondents will rate the qualifications of long-serving members higher than those of newer members, and evaluations of long-serving members' qualifications will be less affected by party labels than those of newer members. Table 5 tests both of these hypotheses. To the models from Table 3, the first, third, and fifth columns add indicator variables for members who have served for three or more terms prior to the 2010 elections.[17] In each case we see that these long-tenured members receive significantly higher ratings, by a factor of 4 to 5 percentage points.

The second, fourth, and sixth columns add to these models interactions between member tenure and party labels. We see that all three issues show a positive interaction: for Democrats, the negative impact of their party labels is cut in half for these more-experienced candidates than for their younger colleagues. This result is significant in the case of healthcare reform, and almost so for climate change and energy policy; though not significant in the case of financial reform, the coefficient is still positive and effect is of a substantial magnitude (about 4%).

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

These findings suggest that the effects of party labels on views of candidates' competence mainly apply to newer candidates, who are typically less known than others who have served many terms in office. As with evaluations of House members' voting records, party labels are shown here to primarily function in the absence of information about specific candidates.

[17] I use an indicator for long-serving members because the long-tailed distribution of terms (with a handful of members serving more than 20 terms) could potentially introduce bias. Running the same models using the logged number of terms (another way to compensate for this distribution) produces very similar results to those shown here, but I prefer the indicator for simplicity of interpretation. I choose to use 3 terms as my cutoff point because those members would have been running in both of the previous two presidential election years, giving even those citizens who only vote occasionally a number of chances to have learned that member's identity; but other cutoffs offer similar results.

4.3 The Importance of Sophistication

The final set of tests looks at the role of respondent sophistication in moderating the effects of party labels. These labels make sense as an information shortcut, but voters' ability to make use of these labels requires that they know something about the parties. Otherwise, if voters were unable to distinguish between parties' positions or qualifications, party labels would be little use for associating particular policies or expectations about competence with individual candidates.

Because we saw in Table 4 that party labels' role in providing clues about voting records sees its effect moderated by voters' own policy preferences, I expect that highly-sophisticated respondents will show a stronger positive effect of agreement with party positions than less-sophisticated respondents. I expect the effects of party labels to be highest for sophisticated voters in assessing candidate qualifications as well, again because sophistication is necessary for labels to be meaningful. Therefore, highly-sophisticated respondents should be more affected by party labels in their evaluations of members' qualifications than less-sophisticated respondents.

Table 6 presents the results of these models, which also control for candidate-specific factors as well (agreement with candidate positions for the voting record models, member tenure for the qualifications models). In both sets of models, my predictions are strongly confirmed. Agreement with the position of a candidate's party has a much stronger positive effect for more sophisticated respondents, across all three of the issues studied.[18] Similarly, sophisticated respondents show a stronger effect of party labels on evaluations of the members' qualifications than other respondents.

[INSERT TABLE 6 HERE]

As expected, though party labels serve as an information shortcut for voters in assessing lesser-known candidates, they do place some burden on the individual to be able to associate parties with specific positions and levels of competence. They can therefore be thought of as most effective for voters who know quite a bit about politics in general but fairly little about the specific candidate they are rating. When voters are more informed about the candidates or less informed about the parties, these labels are far less meaningful.

[18] Sophistication is calculated from a principal-component factor analysis of age, education, and income; the resulting variable has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, and is positively correlated with all three factors.

5 Discussion

The study of issue emphasis has been at an impasse over the past few years. Having developed largely from the framework of Petrocik's (1996) theory of issue ownership, its ability to explain much of what candidates discuss has been hampered by commitment to priming is the main purpose of campaign messages. In this paper, I returned to Petrocik's original conception of issue ownership and questioned its basic premises. The results of my inquiry suggest an alternative theory of what I call "issue advantages", in which both positions and competence play a role. With these findings come implications for theories of issue emphasis which could answer fundamental questions—why candidates so often discuss the same issues, and why preexisting salience is such an important predictor of emphasis—that have frustrated many previous researchers.

I first looked at how voters evaluate parties on issues, by testing variations of the traditional survey question used to measure issue ownership. I proposed an alternative framework in which voters combine their views of parties' positions as well as their competence in assessing their merits on issues. The results of this survey experiment showed that, indeed, individual policy preferences do play a role in these evaluations of parties. Most concretely, this finding argues against the assumption that the traditional survey question actually measures issue ownership as Petrocik conceived of it. But more broadly, the finding that both positions and competence play important roles provides new insight into what makes an issue favorable to a candidate, how it may vary across electoral contexts, and what effect it might have on views of individual candidates.

The second part of my analysis looks at exactly this last question, by investigating the effects of party labels on evaluations of candidates with regard to three distinct issues. I asked respondents to rate their incumbent House members on both their voting records during the previous term and their qualifications for addressing each issue, and party labels were demonstrated to be an important influence on each type of evaluations. Matching actual voting records with respondents' policy preferences on the same bills, I then showed how respondents use party labels to evaluate candidates in light of their own individual opinions. These labels appeared mainly to substitute for information about the individual candidates, however; when

voters know the candidates' own records, they become less reliant on such labels. Similarly, evaluations of candidates' qualifications show that individual candidates' experience in office swayed respondents' evaluations, most acutely by weakening the effects of party labels for long-serving, better-known members. Finally, in each case I demonstrated that these party labels have the greatest effect on the most sophisticated voters, who can better connect party labels with specific positions and expectations about competence.

The importance of these findings is most obvious when considering their implications for theories of issue emphasis. The theory of issue advantages I advance in this paper is one in which parties' standings on issues may vary based on the audience being targeted, can change as a result of events during and between campaigns, and ultimately plays only a modest role in affecting views of individual candidates. This stands in stark contrast to the concept of issue ownership put forward by Petrocik, which assigns issues to be Democratic or Republican regardless of constituency, assumes their ownership to be largely immune to candidates or outside events, and declares party labels to be the dominant force in determining whether a given issue helps or hurts a candidate.

Such differences become most relevant when considering how candidates may use messages about issues to their advantage. My framework allows candidates a variety of options by which they may make a given issue more favorable, in addition to the priming strategy of making an already-favorable issue more salient. Candidates may seek to improve their standings by offering information to distinguish themselves from their parties, persuading voters to change their policy preferences, or reframing issues in terms of more favorable aspects. In each case, competing candidates may each simultaneously hope to benefit by using these tactics, so the paradox of issue convergence would cease to be paradox at all—instead, it may simply be the natural outcome of candidates presenting different arguments to the same voters.

This scenario would also justify why exactly preexisting salience is such an important determinant of issue emphasis. Assuming that higher salience magnifies the impact of an issue on voters' overall candidate preferences, then any attempts to increase the favorability of that issue to a candidate (such as those described above) will offer the greatest potential reward on issues on which voters' minds are already focused. By offering the chance to resolve these long-standing questions in the field of issue emphasis, my findings serve to both clarify the patterns observed in

previous studies and suggest a way ahead for future research into campaign strategy and its effects on voters.

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Table 1: Alternative Question Wordings and Party Preferences

Percentage of respondents preferring Republicans on each issue

		Alternate Wordings	
Issue	Traditional Wording	Position Cue	Competence 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***
n	220	183	207

*** = Result is significantly different from traditional wording's result at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (difference-of-means tests). Percentages do not include respondents who gave "'no difference" or "not sure" responses. Number of respondents presented is the mean for a given question wording across all issues. Traditional wording varies from 188 to 239 respondents, position cue from 134 to 207, competence cue from 179 to 229; significance tests are calculated at the actual number of respondents for each issue.

Table 2: Modeling Party Preferences Across Issues

DV: Preference for Republicans on an issue (binary logit model)

	Traditional Wording	*Position Cue Wording*	*Competence Cue Wording*	*All Wordings*
PID: Democrat	-1.92***	-2.29***	-1.99***	-1.92***
	(0.17)	(0.22)	(0.19)	(0.17)
PID: Democrat × Position Cue				-0.37
				(0.29)
PID: Democrat × Competence Cue				-0.07
				(0.25)
PID: Republican	2.14***	1.63***	1.56***	2.14***
	(0.23)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.23)
PID: Republican × Position Cue				-0.52*
				(0.31)
PID: Republican × Valence Cue				-0.58*
				(0.30)
Ideology	1.45***	1.96***	1.53***	1.45***
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.10)
Ideology × Position Cue				0.52***
				(0.19)
Ideology × Competence Cue				0.08
				(0.16)
Issue Fixed Effects	55.01***	46.99***	82.34***	
Issue Fixed Effects × Traditional Wording				52.81***
Issue Fixed Effects × Position Cue				99.53***
Issue Fixed Effects × Competence Cue				132.00***
Position Cue				-1.83***
				(0.69)
Competence Cue				-0.11
				(0.56)
Constant	-3.62***	-5.45***	-3.73***	-3.62***
	(0.40)	(0.49)	(0.40)	(0.37)
n	1984	1643	1866	5493

Table entries are binary logit coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses, except for the results under "Issue Fixed Effects", which are Wald statistics (chi-squared, 8 df) for the joint significance of interactions between the given wording and indicator variables for each issue. *** = Result is significant at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (two-tailed). DV is coded 0 for Democratic preference, 1 for Republican preference. Model does not include respondents who gave "'no difference" or "not sure" responses. All issues are pooled, so individual respondents appear in this data multiple times.

Table 3: Party Cues and Candidate Evaluations

DV: Evaluation of House member's voting record and qualifications on issue (5-point scale, OLS model)

	Voting Record			*Qualifications*		
	Financial Regulation	Healthcare Reform	Climate and Energy	Financial Regulation	Healthcare Reform	Climate and Energy
Democratic Member	-0.30***	-0.43***	-0.39***	-0.36***	-0.41***	-0.38***
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Same Party	1.03***	1.06***	1.10***	0.90***	0.94***	0.90***
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Opposite Party	-1.08***	-1.22***	-0.95***	-1.00***	-1.05***	-1.01***
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Age	-0.03	0.00	-0.02	0.02	0.04	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education	0.08*	0.05	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.04
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Income	0.00	0.02	-0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	3.05***	3.06***	3.07***	3.18***	3.10***	3.09***
	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.18)
R-squared	0.3080	0.3033	0.3046	0.2861	0.2971	0.2815
n	846	873	829	900	902	899

Table entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** = Result is significant at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (two-tailed). DV is coded on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 indicating the most negative rating and 5 the most positive; "Voting Record" question asked respondents the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the votes cast by the member on each issue, while the "Qualifications" question asked respondents how well qualified they believed the member to be with regard to handling each issue. Respondents who answered "don't know" or who skipped a given question are omitted from the sample.

Table 4: Determinants of Positional Evaluations

DV: Agreement with House member's voting record on issue (5-point scale, OLS model)

	Financial Regulation		*Healthcare Reform*		*Climate and Energy*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Democratic Member	-0.48***	-0.58***	-0.42***	-0.32***	-0.41***	-0.43***
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Agree with Party Position	0.68***	0.41***	0.76***	0.33***	0.61***	0.38***
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Agree with Member Position		0.40***		0.89***		0.46***
		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.05)
Same Party	0.76***	0.67***	0.59***	0.30***	0.82***	0.72***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Opposite Party	-0.87***	-0.68***	-0.94***	-0.45***	-0.78***	-0.61***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Age	0.00	-0.02	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education	0.06	0.07	0.02	0.07	0.02	0.02
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Income	0.02	0.00	0.04	0.01	0.00	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	2.97***	3.09***	3.00***	2.90***	2.96***	3.03***
	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.18)
R-squared	0.3976	0.4333	0.3935	0.5642	0.3839	0.4490
n	846		873		829	

Table entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** = Result is significant at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (two-tailed). See Table 4 caption for more info about dependent variables and model specifications.

Table 5: Determinants of Competence Evaluations

DV: Assessment of House member's qualifications on issue (5-point scale, OLS model)

	Financial Regulation		*Healthcare Reform*		*Climate and Energy*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Democratic Member	-0.33***	-0.45***	-0.38***	-0.63***	-0.34***	-0.54***
	(0.08)	(0.16)	(0.09)	(0.17)	(0.08)	(0.16)
Member Tenure: 3+ terms	0.16*	0.06	0.19**	-0.04	0.21**	0.02
	(0.98)	(0.19)	(0.09)	(0.20)	(0.09)	(0.20)
Member Tenure		0.16		0.35*		0.29
× Democratic Member		(0.19)		(0.20)		(0.19)
Same Party	0.89***	0.88***	0.92***	0.91***	0.88***	0.87***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Opposite Party	-1.00***	-0.88***	-1.05***	-1.05***	-1.01***	-1.01***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Age	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.04
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Income	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	3.05***	3.13***	2.96***	3.13***	2.93***	3.08***
	(0.19)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.23)
R-squared	0.2889	0.2896	0.3005	0.3033	0.2859	0.2878
n	900		902		899	

Table entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** = Result is significant at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (two-tailed). See Table 4 caption for more info about dependent variables and model specifications.

Table 6: The Moderating Effects of Voter Sophistication

DV: Evaluation of House member's voting record and qualifications on issue (5-point scale, OLS model)

	Voting Record			*Qualifications*		
	Financial Regulation	Healthcare Reform	Climate and Energy	Financial Regulation	Healthcare Reform	Climate and Energy
Democratic Member	-0.54***	-0.29***	-0.40***	-0.32***	-0.37***	-0.33***
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Democratic Member	-0.08	-0.02	-0.07	-0.15**	-0.21***	-0.15**
× Respondent Sophistication	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Agree with Party	0.37***	0.32***	0.37***			
Position	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)			
Agree with Party	0.27***	0.26***	0.25***			
× Respondent Sophistication	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)			
Agree with Member	0.41***	0.89***	0.46***			
Position	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)			
Member Tenure: 3+ terms				0.15*	0.17*	0.20**
				(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Same Party	0.65***	0.28***	0.67***	0.88***	0.94***	0.90***
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.14)
Opposite Party	-0.65***	-0.41***	-0.58***	-1.00***	-1.04***	-1.00***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Age	-0.04	0.00	0.01	0.06	0.10**	0.07*
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education	0.07	0.05	0.02	0.07	0.10**	0.08*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05	(0.05)	(0.05)
Income	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.06*	0.07**	0.05
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	3.19***	2.97***	3.05***	2.73***	2.52***	2.62***
	(0.23)	(0.24)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.25)
R-squared	0.4475	0.5776	0.5428	0.2920	0.3061	0.2887
n	846	873	829	900	902	899

Table entries are OLS coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** = Result is significant at > 0.01 level, ** = at > 0.05 level, * = at > 0.1 level (two-tailed). Sophistication is a continuous variable (mean = 0, SD = 1) generated from a principle-component factor analysis of age, education, and income; because it is thus a linear combination of these three included demographics, it cannot (and does not need to) be included in these models on its own. See Table 4 caption for more info about dependent variables and model specifications.