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Research Statement (9/28/11)

My research explores the dynamics of political campaigns, particularly the choice by candidates of whether and how to discuss particular policy issues and the resulting effects on voters. Existing theories of issue emphasis in campaigns primarily strive to explain why competing candidates' issue agendas may differ, and assert that candidates' main goal in campaigns is to prime their most favorable issues and make them more salient to voters. I take a different approach, instead focusing on the larger, unanswered question of why competing candidates' issue agendas so often overlap. In these instances, rather than try to make favorable issues more salient, candidates seek to improve their relative standings on issues which are already highly salient.

I develop an alternative theory of issue emphasis in my dissertation, in which candidates have a range of additional strategies beyond priming. This theory is based on an original model of issue voting which juxtaposes the main features of spatial models with theories of economic voting and issue ownership. This framework implies five factors which could be affected by campaigns: perceptions of candidates' issue positions, voters' own policy preferences, appraisals of candidates' competence (based on past performance and qualifications), voters' weighting of positional and competence considerations on each issue, and the distribution of salience across issues.

As such, I argue that existing theories built around priming strategies (which only consider one of these factors, salience) are too narrow. Throughout my dissertation, I support this contention with compelling evidence that, in addition to priming favorable issues, candidates also:

- provide information to educate or mislead voters about their own issue positions and those of their opponents
- persuade voters to change their policy preferences, beyond simply providing cues for partisans to adopt the positions of their nominees
- offer flattering appraisals of their own competence and critiques of their opponents'
- reframe issues to focus voters' attentions on the aspects of each issue most favorable to the candidate

In each case, these findings represent valuable contributions to the literature on campaigns and voters, demonstrating strategies and effects long suspected but rarely substantiated with real data.

I then go on to show that candidates employ these strategies to take advantage of opportunities created by their own characteristics and the distribution of public opinion. On highly-salient issues, for example, candidates whose positions are far from voters' preferences are likely to mislead the public about where they stand. Through the use of original survey and experimental data, hand-coded records of campaign websites, and innovative methods of analysis, my dissertation refutes the conventional wisdom about how voters evaluate candidates, how these views can be shaped by campaigns, and how candidates choose their issue emphasis strategies. My findings ultimately support a more multifaceted view of the determinants and effects of political campaigns than seen in previous studies.

Dissertation Summary

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I examine how voters evaluate parties and candidates on issues. The most prevalent explanation for issue emphasis by candidates, Petrocik's theory of issue ownership, asserts that voters evaluate candidates on issues based on their parties' reputations for competence, without regard for issue positions. Candidates thus choose to prime issues which are owned by their parties. In practice, however, issue ownership has been measured with a simple survey question asking which party would best "handle" each issue, and the fundamental assumptions of the theory—about how voters evaluate parties and how these party evaluations carry over to individual candidates—have never been scrutinized. I begin by analyzing how voters respond to this survey question, with an original experiment I included in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. The results show that, in line with previous work on spatial models but contrary to issue ownership theory, voters indeed evaluate parties on positions as well as competence. This demonstrates that responses to the traditional issue ownership survey question have been widely misinterpreted: rather than reflecting the parties' reputations for competence, responses are more often driven by voters' reactions to the parties' positions.

I then introduce original data from the 2010 elections in which respondents rate their House members' positions and competence distinctly for each of three issues, and find that party labels mainly affect sophisticated voters' views of less-known candidates. As they learn more about these candidates, their reliance on party heuristics decreases. These results demonstrate voters to be far more sophisticated than Petrocik and others give them credit for, and suggest a wider array of

options for candidates seeking to influence voters through campaigns.

In the second chapter, I look at how campaigns can affect these evaluations. Though campaigns are a ubiquitous feature of democratic elections, evidence that they have any impact on votes remains scarce. I attribute this lack of evidence to the limitations of the data and methods available to previous researchers, and present evidence from the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections to support a richer view of campaign effects. By calculating TV ad spending on individual issues, in each media market during each day of the election, I estimate individuals' exposure to ads on specific issues in between the dates of their interviews. I then develop a new approach to analyzing election panel data which takes advantage of the variation in interview dates between respondents. By observing voters' perceptions of the candidates' positions, their own policy preferences, and their candidate preferences in both waves of the panel, then combining this data with individual-level estimates of ad exposure between waves, I am able to distinctly identify the potentially-offsetting effects of competing candidates' messages.

The results offer a very different picture of campaign effects than that offered by previous studies. First, campaigns do not uniformly educate voters about the candidates' positions as many recent studies have claimed. Instead, though candidates whose positions are close to voters' will be sure to inform them of these positions, their opponents just as often seek to mislead the public and negate that advantage. Voters are also persuaded by candidates' messages to change their policy preferences, beyond merely partisans updating their stated preferences to match their nominees' positions. And finally, I show that each type of effect can substantially impact vote choice.

The final chapter of my dissertation further investigates the "paradox" of issue convergence—why competing candidates so often discuss the same issues, despite the predictions of prominent theories which focus on priming strategies. These theories focus on candidates' efforts to make highly-favorable issues more salient, but I argue that candidates just as often seek to make already-salient issues more favorable. As evidence, I illustrate how candidates use campaign messages to reframe issues and provide information about their positions and competence, by introducing an original dataset—which I call the Discussing Issues in Congressional Elections, or DICE, dataset—tracking the discussion of policy issues on the websites of Senate candidates from 2002 to 2008. These hand-coded data are unique for recording not only which issues are addressed but also the specific types of messages used (out of more than 40 possible types) when discussing them. By of-

fering a more detailed view of campaign messages across a range of issues than is available from any existing resource, the DICE dataset makes it possible to identify the strategies employed by candidates on specific issues by looking at these messages' *content*, rather than inferring the strategies used based on their *effects* (as was done in the previous chapter).

My analysis demonstrates that candidates choose which strategies to employ based upon their own characteristics as well as the electoral context, highlighting for voters the most flattering aspects of each issue and offering information to make their positions and qualifications more appealing (or their opponents' less so). With regard to the motivating question of issue convergence, then, I explain that it should not be a surprise at all that we witness high rates of convergence on the most salient issues in each election. The notion that this should *not* occur is merely an artifact of overly-narrow theories about what campaigns can do, and such theories are highly discredited by the evidence shown in every chapter of my dissertation. These findings demonstrate that campaigns serve a far broader purpose than simply priming favorable issues, and give a starkly different perspective on issue emphasis than those seen in previous theories. My alternative, developed throughout each chapter, provides an original framework for continuing to develop a more realistic view of political campaigns.

Additional Research

I am also involved in several coauthored projects with faculty at NYU and elsewhere, including Jonathan Nagler, Joshua Tucker, Jan Leighley, and Ted Brader. My work with Tucker and Brader looks at conflicting political pressures on individuals and their effects on participation. In our first paper, we develop an original method for estimating cross-pressures which incorporates myriad demographic characteristics into a single *cross-pressure score*, reflecting the range of conflicting or reinforcing influences from group memberships which manifest in both social interaction and policy preferences. Our measure is suitable for multiparty contexts and has only minimal data requirements, and thus allows for cross-pressures to be studied more widely than is currently possible. The second paper in this series considers the effects of both social cross-pressures (from interactions in ones social network) and issue cross-pressures (from holding policy preferences which cut across ideological lines) on various forms of political participation. We evaluate competing approaches to measuring both social and issue cross-pressures, test them side-by-side to discern the most promis-

ing causal pathways, and find demobilizing effects from both social and issue cross-pressures on many forms of participation.

My collaboration with Nagler and Leighley explores why negative ads are associated with higher turnout. Looking at advertising in congressional races, we find that the explanation lies with partisans' polarized reactions to negative ads: an attack on a candidate will hurt him most among his opponents' base, while his own supporters will ignore the ad or even rally to his defense. Because preexisting attitudes are reinforced by negative ads, partisans on both sides become less indifferent and more likely to vote. In another ongoing project, we compare trends in voter turnout with shifting patterns in education over the past forty years, to test whether formal education affects turnout directly or simply serves as a proxy for latent sophistication.

Future Plans

In the coming years, I plan to both refine the existing products of my research and extend these studies into new areas. My latest venture has been the design of a lab experiment—to be conducted this November—which examines the effects of social interaction on policy preferences, partisan attitudes, and motivations to participate. Beyond these projects, I am also embarking on a new line of research inspired by my findings about campaigns. Having demonstrated how policy issues can be employed in order to win elections, I will next explore the implications of these findings for policy-making once in office. The purpose of my research in this area is to better understand how the unique characteristics of American political institutions—including legislative rules, primary elections, and campaign finance regulations—combine to make good policies into bad politics and vice versa. My analysis will explore the incentives created by the electoral process, to discover how these incentives affect the ability of those in government to respond to public opinion and address difficult policy issues. After demonstrating the important role campaigns play in elections, my motivation for this next project is to show campaigns' relevance to other areas of political conflict as well.