Issue Advantages in Targeted Campaign Strategy

What a Closer Look at Issue Positions Can Reveal About Campaign Targeting

Andrew Therritt, New York University

Presented at the 26th Annual Meeting of the Society for Political Methodology • July 23–25, 2009 • Yale University

Theory: Issue ownership has given us a useful framework for investigating how public opinion affects which issues campaigns choose to emphasize. However, its rudimentary concept of party-issue interactions does not allow for - or candidate-level variation and relies too heavily on a vague idea of party reputations. I propose an alternative, position-based theory of issue advantages which allows advantages to be measured for individual candidates with regard to specific groups of voters. This theory brings the study of issue emphasis in line with the broader work on issue voting and spatial models, and particularly with position-based theories of voter targeting such as that of Illiglou & Shields (2008).

Data and Methods: A survey experiment tests whether the traditional issue ownership question is measuring parties' reputations or voters' policy preferences, and finds the latter. Turning to the 2000 US Senate elections, I use TV advertising as a proxy for issue emphasis. I then construct measures of candidates' issue advantages with regard to different partisan groups, and use these in a simple issue emphasis model to test a few theories of whom campaigns target. The rest of the theory proceeds in a similar fashion to issue ownership: a candidate's issue advantages do not distinguish between candidates, are typically fixed across time, and are subject to the same limitations.

Findings: Campaigns target specific partisan groups with their issue agendas, rather than the public as a whole. Specifically, the results show that candidates target both their own base and their opponent's as well. The specific choice of target, however, depends on the competitiveness of the election, the size of the group in each category, and the other variables. This contradicts theories which argue that candidates target one specific group over others.

Issue Ownership and an Alternative Theory of Issue Advantages

There are a variety of reasons why candidates choose to focus on particular issues. Issue ownership has become one of the most prominent of these issues over the past two decades. It is the view that parties have control over the public agenda and are respectively better or worse at handling issues. However, this theory is subject to several limitations. First, it argues that candidate-issue interactions are independent of issue ownership, but we know that these are not independent. Second, this theory does not account for the fact that issue ownership questions are not subject to these limitations. I then present a new approach to rating issue advantages based on issue positions. This approach allows us to estimate issue advantages for individual candidates in their own district, and also allows for comparisons across different segments of the electorate.

Using Issue Advantages to Test Competing Theories of Voter Targeting

The results support the view that the survey question essentially measures campaign strategy. What these two theories have in common is that they both argue that candidates have an incentive to emphasize issue advantages in order to attract voters. Using this framework, I then test two theories of voter targeting: one that uses a candidate's policy emphasis, and another that uses issue ownership. These two theories predict different outcomes for issue advantages: one theory predicts that candidates will use issue advantages to target the base of the other party, while the other theory predicts that candidates will use issue advantages to target the own party's base.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper sought to contribute to our understanding of why candidates choose to emphasize certain issues over others. Specifically, I:

- Proposed an alternative theory which is position-based and which allows for comparisons across different segments of the electorate.
- Showed that the survey question does not determine issue ownership, even though it is widely used in the literature.
- Developed an approach which allows for comparison of issue advantages with other theories of voter targeting.
- Applied this theory to test two theories of voter targeting, the "issue ownership" theory of Petrocik and the "persuadable voter" theory of Hillygus & Shields. It found that strategy choices depend on campaign within the context of the other party's candidate.

Table 1: Effect of Alternative Models of Issue Ownership on Television Ad Spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Position</th>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Security</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Social Security</th>
<th>Medicare</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Votes Cast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Left</td>
<td>1.013**</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.001**</td>
<td>0.999</td>
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<td>1.002</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Right</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.001**</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td>1.03</td>
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Table 2: Impact of Issue Advantages on Television Ad Spending

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Note: * = significant at 90% level; ** = significant at 95% level.