Issue Advantages in Targeted Campaigns
What a Closer Look at Issue Positions Can Reveal About Campaign Strategy

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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-owned issues does not allow for group- 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 Hillygus & 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.

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 opponents' as well. The specific choice of target, however, depends on the competitiveness of the election, the size of each group in the electorate, and other variables. This contradicts theories which argue that candidates target one specific group over others.

Issue ownership theory has made important contributions to our understanding of why candidates choose to emphasize certain issues, but its reliance on a simplistic concept of parties "owning" specific issues has limited its empirical usefulness. Issue ownership, according to theory, is determined by parties' reputations for capable handling of particular issues, and a party benefits electorally when the salience of its owned issues increases. Because of the myriad sources of these reputations, issue ownership is difficult to measure directly, and most studies rely on survey questions asking which party respondents believe will best handle various issues. The resulting measures of issue ownership do not distinguish between candidates, are typically fixed across districts, and cannot account for issue emphasis strategies which target specific groups rather than the population as a whole.

This paper proposes an alternative theory of issue advantages which is not subject to these limitations. I first argue that candidates' issue positions are more important determinants of issue advantages than parties' reputations. This claim is supported by a survey experiment which shows that the usual issue ownership survey question leads to responses based more on issue positions than on parties' reputations. I then present a new approach to estimating issue advantages based on issue positions. This approach allows us to estimate issue advantages for individual candidates in their own districts, and also allows for these advantages to vary across different segments of the electorate. Such a feature opens up new possibilities for research on campaign strategy, by enabling researchers to see whether certain groups are targeted more often than others in candidates' issue appeals.

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 over the past two decades. It was based on work by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Riker (1993), coined by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), formalized by Petrocik (1996), and has been used in a wide range of articles in the years since. While Petrocik's description of the theory of issue ownership spans multiple pages, the basics of the theory can be condensed into three critical parts:

1. Certain issues are "owned" by one party or another, based on the parties' reputations for being able to handle these issues.
2. Candidates benefit electorally when the issues owned by their party are highly salient to the voters.
3. To maximize this benefit, candidates seek to raise the salience of their owned issues by emphasizing them during campaigns.

Petrocik theorized that parties gain a reputation for "competence on handling the issues" (p. 825) from the parties' actions while in office and the demographic characteristics of their supporters. Critically, these reputations are not a product of the particular issue positions the party takes. In Petrocik's formulation, the typical voter does not care about the parties' positions; she "lacks a clear preference about social and policy issues… The key fact 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)

The theory of issue advantages proposed herein takes a different view. This theory differs from issue ownership on three main points. Individual candidates (rather than the party in general) are evaluated on issues; these evaluations take place at the level of the individual voter; and they are a product of position on policy issues. Specifically:

1. The individual voter *does* have positions on particular issues, and evaluates specific candidates on those issues based on both her own position and the candidates'. The smaller the distance between a candidate's position and hers, the more positive the effect of that issue on her ultimate evaluation of her.
2. The voter's ultimate evaluation of the candidates is mediated by the salience of each issue. Every individual voter, then, has her own set of best issues for each candidate to appeal to her on.
3. Candidates' overall issue advantages are the aggregate product of these voters' evaluations. Because these advantages are subjective rather than objective—they are based on the issue positions of the voters as well as those of the candidate—they can vary depending upon the group of voters whose opinions are being aggregated.

The rest of this theory proceeds in a similar fashion to issue ownership: *candidates benefit from holding advantages on highly salient issues, and as such emphasize their most advantaged issues to increase their salience.* While this is not the first theory of issue emphasis to employ issue positions (see Simon 2002, for example), it is the first to both argue against issue ownership on theoretical grounds and to also present an alternative which allows for issue advantages to vary between groups of voters. This latter feature distinguishes the theory as a powerful tool for studying issue emphasis in the context of targeted campaigns.

Measuring Issue Ownership: Do Positions Matter After All?

If the party reputations at the center of issue ownership are not as important as advertised, what about the research showing the effect of issue ownership on both voter behavior and issue emphasis? I contend that the studies showing an effect of issue ownership did so not because of the role of parties' reputations, but because the commonly-used survey question which determines issue ownership actually measures respondents' party preferences based on issue positions. In other words, the parties appear to own particular issues because they have the most preferred policy positions on those issues—not because of their reputations for handling those issues.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I present the results of a survey experiment I included in the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is an internet-based panel survey which includes a main section of common content and additional modules designed by participating researchers and administered to subsets of the respondent panel (approximately a thousand respondents). The survey experiment I designed tested whether a change in the wording of the traditional issue ownership question, cueing respondents to base their responses on either issue positions or party reputations, would change the resulting responses.

Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of three groups and asked to evaluate the parties on eight different issues. Each group was asked a different wording of the party evaluation question:

1. **Traditional issue ownership wording:** "Which party do you think would do a better job handling the following issues?"
2. **Reputation cue:** "Which party do you think is better qualified to handle the following issues?"
3. **Position cue:** "Which party do you think has better ideas for handling the following issues?"

By comparing the responses to the traditional question to the responses from the alternate wordings, we get an indirect look at how respondents generate their answers to the original question. *If the results from the traditional and the reputation cue wordings are more similar than those from the traditional and the position cue wordings, this would support issue ownership theory. The opposite result, however, would suggest that issue positions are the dominant factor driving measures of issue ownership.*

I analyze the resulting survey responses at both the aggregate and individual levels, performing difference-of-means tests on simplified binary responses (dropping "no difference" and "not sure" responses), chi-squared tests on aggregated complete responses, logit regressions predicting individuals' simplified responses, and OLS regressions predicting individuals' complete responses (making pro-Democrat responses positive, pro-Republican responses negative, and other responses at 0). The individual level models predicted responses based on demographic variables, partisanship, ideology, and dummies for the position and reputation cue treatments, and were run separately for each issue. Because of the outsized impact of partisanship on question responses, I ran the individual-level models twice, once for all respondents and then again for only independents.

In all of these analyses, it is clear that the policy cue wording produced results much more similar to those of the traditional wording than did the reputation cue wording. Table 1 shows the results of one of these analyses, the individual-level OLS model of issue responses (the control variables are not shown for space reasons). All wordings are included in the same model, with dummy variables indicating the alternate wordings. The reputation cue had a significant effect at the 95% level for four of eight issues considered, and had a 90% significant effect for two others. The position cue, meanwhile, only had a 95% significant effect for one issue out of eight, and a 90% significant effect for two others. In terms of magnitude, the effect of the reputation cue was greater than the effect of the position cue for six of eight issues.

These results support the notion that the survey question ostensibly measuring parties' reputations has actually been better at measuring respondents' preferences for the parties' issue positions. As such, the research showing an effect of issue ownership on vote choice and on campaign strategy was more likely showing an effect of position-based issue advantages instead. This finding is important in that it establishes the potential of an issue advantage measure based on issue positions to supplant traditional issue ownership.

Using Issue Advantages to Test Competing Theories of Voter Targeting

The value of this new concept of issue advantages becomes clear when applied to recent theories of voter targeting. While these theories have clear implications for issue emphasis—candidates will craft their issue emphasis strategies to appeal to the targeted voters more than others—such theories could not be tested in the context of issue ownership. Issue advantages, however, can accommodate this easily: *candidates will choose an issue emphasis strategy based more on their issue advantages with targeted voters than on their advantages with other voters.* In other words, to see which groups are being targeted, we can estimate issue advantages separately with regard to each group and see which of these advantages is the best predictor of issue emphasis.

Two recent theories about voter targeting go against the conventional wisdom that parties target undecided "swing" voters. The first strategy, most closely associated with Karl Rove and Matthew Dowd in George W. Bush's election campaigns, advocates that candidates should focus on appealing to their own partisan base, in order to maximize their turnout, because true swing voters are far fewer than is often thought (Dowd 2005). Meanwhile, Hillygus & Shields (2008) take a similar view of swing voters, but instead argue for trying to peel away voters from the opponent's base who hold different views from their party on some issues. Candidates can get these "persuadable partisans" to cross over if these issues can be made salient.

In terms of issue positions, this leads to a fairly straightforward test. Do candidates choose issues based on:

- their advantages with their partisan base,
- their advantages with independents (the most common swing voters),
- or their advantages with their opponents' base?

Candidates' issue advantages with the most targeted of these three groups will be a better predictor of issue emphasis than their advantages with the other groups.

I test these hypotheses in the context of the 2000 US Senate elections. The dependent variable is level of emphasis on each of eight issues for 50 major party candidates, using data on TV advertising from the WiscAds/CMAG dataset (Goldstein 2002). For each issue, I calculate the total amount spent on that issue as a percentage of total ad spending. The final dependent variable is the log of this percentage, to reflect diminishing returns from repeated emphasis of the same issue.

On the predictor side, I construct measures of issue advantages using individuals' responses to position questions in the National Annenberg Election Survey. Following Ansolabehere (2008), I use between two and six questions on each issue to estimate respondents' positions using factor analysis. Since we do not have equivalent measures for candidates' issue positions, I assume that candidates' positions reflect the mean position of their base supporters. We know that parties' candidates are the product of state-level primaries, and as such, they reflect the positions of their partisan base to a greater or lesser degree. This assumption allows us to readily calculate candidates' advantages by aggregating responses for each partisan group in each state.

Table 2
Issue Emphasis Model Testing Targeting of Different Partisan Groups
(DV = logged % of TV ad spending devoted to given issue)

	All Candidates	Competitive Races	Uncompetitive Races	Democrats	Republicans
Issue Advantage (with Base)	-0.319 (0.250)	0.063 (0.342)	-0.526* (0.403)	-0.351 (0.403)	-0.292 (0.367)
Issue Advantage (with Independents)	0.120 (0.221)	0.072 (0.236)	0.221 (0.473)	0.260 (0.289)	0.215 (0.350)
Issue Advantage (with Opponent's Base)	0.474** (0.265)	0.263 (0.342)	0.401 (0.429)	0.462* (0.317)	0.489 (0.509)
Issue Advantage × Partisan Group Size (with Base)	1.071* (0.778)	0.066 (1.096)	1.458 (1.208)	0.840 (1.165)	0.826 (1.189)
Issue Advantage × Partisan Group Size (with Independents)	-0.313 (0.627)	-0.258 (0.659)	-0.445 (1.380)	-0.219 (0.815)	-0.941 (0.986)
Issue Advantage × Partisan Group Size (with Opponent's Base)	-0.991 (0.856)	-0.615 (1.104)	-0.392 (1.373)	-1.302 (1.088)	-1.295 (1.535)
Root MSE	1.1625	1.0235	1.2734	1.0488	1.2164
n	400	240	160	184	216

Partisan group size is the percentage of respondents in candidate's state affiliating with given partisan group (candidate's party, no party, or opponent's party). 50 US Senate candidates in 2000 are considered, for a total of 400 observations. Cell entries are OLS coefficients, with SEs in parentheses. Advantages are standardized to mean = 0, standard deviation = 1 for each issue. Fixed effects for each issue, constants, and controls for partisan group sizes are included but not shown. * = significant at 90% level; ** = significant at 95% level (one-tailed).

I calculate a candidate's advantages with his own and his opponent's partisans by looking at the standard deviation of the issue positions of each partisan group. A higher standard deviation indicates a higher average distance between a partisan and her candidate. As such, the base-turnout strategy mentioned earlier would see advantages from a low standard deviation among the candidate's own base, while the persuadable partisans strategy would associate an advantage with a high standard deviation among the opponent's base. Candidates' advantages with independents are calculated by measuring the distance of independents' complete positions from the mean independent relative to the distance between the candidate and his opponent. All of these measures are rescaled to create estimates of candidates' issue advantages with respect to each group which have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 over each issue, with higher values corresponding to greater advantages. Finally, in case candidates' choice of strategy is dependent which group is dominant in the electorate, I also include an interaction variable which weights these issue advantages by the size of that partisan group in the state electorate.

While this issue emphasis model is intentionally simplistic, I do also include fixed effects for each issue, to account in at least a partial way for the salience of certain issues at the national level. This also controls, roughly, for differences in the payoff of advertising between issues that are not tied to any specific candidate.
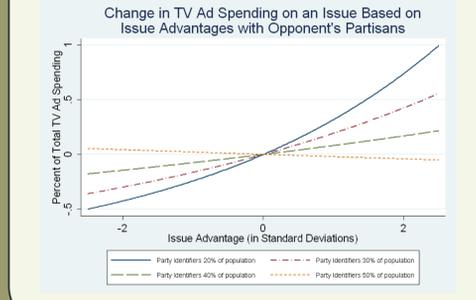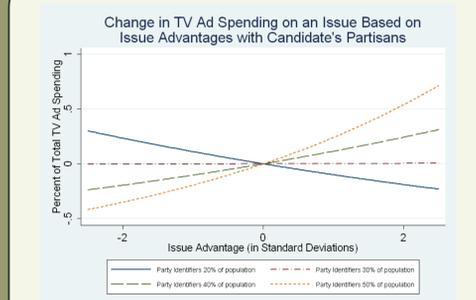
Table 2 presents the results of the model, with alternate versions separating respondents by the competitiveness of races and by the party of the candidate. Because of the simple model and the small sample, the substantive results are of modest value, but some interesting patterns do emerge. Looking at all respondents, we see that candidates appear to utilize issue advantages with their base only when the base is sufficiently large, but that advantages with the opponents are important regardless of that group's size. Advantages with independents are not significantly utilized in either case. Figures 1 and 2 provide graphical depictions of the size of these effects. We see in **Figure 1** that the effect of issue advantages with the base is highly dependent on the number of base supporters. When the base is large (>40%), these advantages increase emphasis, but the effect disappears when the base is smaller. Meanwhile, in **Figure 2**, we see that advantages with the opponent's base increase emphasis except when the opponent's base is very large.

Breaking down the model by electoral competitiveness, we also see some crucial distinctions. Comparing the root mean squared errors, we see that the model explains more of the variance in close races—this is sensible, since there's greater incentive to be strategic when it may actually affect the outcome. This greater strategic incentive, however, does not translate into a single strategy being dominant; candidates appear to be choosing their targets based on additional unobserved factors affecting the race.

Finally, we see very different behavior from Republican and Democratic candidates. Democrats appear to be utilizing issue advantages at a much higher level than the Republicans, as evidenced by a root mean squared error which is about fifteen percent lower. Such differences in strategy are another area in which this new approach could be useful.

As for the two theories being tested (Hillygus & Shields' persuadable partisans and the Rove/Dowd base-turnout strategy), while these results do show that their favored strategies are targeted in some cases, the main finding is that *no single group dominates issue emphasis strategies.* Instead, these strategies are just single items in a strategist's toolkit.

Figures 1 & 2
Impact of Issue Advantages on Television Ad Spending

Change in TV Ad Spending on an Issue Based on Issue Advantages with Candidate's Partisans

Change in TV Ad Spending on an Issue Based on Issue Advantages with Opponent's Partisans

Conclusion and Future Research

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

- Argued that, contrary to issue ownership, issue positions are more important than party reputations to issue emphasis strategies.
- Proposed an alternative theory which is position-based and which also overcomes limitations in the estimation of issue ownership.
- Shown that the survey question used to determine issue ownership is more likely picking up on position-based issue advantages instead.
- Developed an approach which allows issue advantages to be measured for individual candidates with regard to specific groups.
- Applied issue advantages to test two theories of voter targeting, the "persuadable partisans" theory of Hillygus & Shields and the Rove/Dowd base-turnout strategy, and found that strategy choice depends on competitiveness, the size of partisan groups, and other factors.

In my future work, I intend to develop the measure further and apply it as part of a broader study of issue emphasis which includes:

- A comprehensive model. I intend to develop a model of issue emphasis which incorporates issue advantages with the candidates' records, the preexisting salience of issues to the electorate, and the pressure to respond to opponents' messages.
- An expert survey. Through a survey of professional campaign strategists, I will examine to what degree actual issue emphasis strategy differs from our predictions and why.
- Testing campaign effects. Since their ultimate purpose is to win elections, it is critical to see whether theorized and observed issue emphasis strategies actually have the intended effects on voters.

Finally, the idea of issue advantages can also be applied outside of the study of issue emphasis. In that case, the measures used herein may be too complicated, and a simpler one more appropriate. At its most general, the measure can be used to measure the relationship between each party's positions and those of the average voter. By simplifying these advantages as such, we can even separate issues into advantaged and disadvantaged for each party—a categorization that is as straightforward and basic as that embodied in issue ownership.

Table 1
Effect of Alternate Wordings of Issue Ownership Survey Question on Individuals' Party Preference on Issues
(DV: Party preference with regard to specified issue. Positive results indicate pro-Democrat effect, negative results pro-Republican.)

	Healthcare	Social Security	Iraq War	Terrorism	Economy	Taxes	Education	Energy	Immigration
Reputation Cue Wording	0.100***	0.072***	-0.034	-0.076***	0.045*	-0.010	0.054**	0.048*	-0.020
Position Cue Wording	0.054*	0.056*	-0.009	-0.086***	0.027	-0.009	0.035	-0.000	-0.023
R^2	0.2511	0.2479	0.2587	0.2538	0.2410	0.2554	0.2494	0.2525	0.2163

Each respondent was asked one of three question wordings. All wordings were included in the same model, with dummy variables for respondents asked alternate wordings. Cell entries are the OLS coefficients of those dummies, stemming from a model which also controls for age, education, race, religion, income, and ideology (not shown for space reasons). n = 467 (Independents only; using all respondents produces similar results). The dependent variable is coded -0.5 for a Republican preference, 0 for no difference / not sure, and 0.5 for a Democratic preference.
* = significant at 90% level; ** = significant at 95% level; *** = significant at 99% level (one-tailed).