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Determinants of Issue Emphasis in Gubernatorial and Senate Debates

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Abstract

This study employs computer content analysis to investigate the issue emphasis of political campaign debates. Issue Ownership Theory (Petrcik, 1996) posits that each political party “owns” a set of issues, which means that a majority of the public believes that one party is better able to handle that issue than the other party. He predicts that political candidates will emphasize the issues owned by their own party. This study applies computer content analysis to 12 gubernatorial and 12 senatorial debates. The results confirm the predictions of issue ownership theory: Candidates discussed the issues owned by their political party more, and issues owned by the opposing party less, than their opponents.

Most political communication research has focused on presidential campaigns,

particularly debates (books on presidential debates include Benoit et al., 2002; Benoit & Wells, 1996; Bishop, Meadow, & Jackson-Beeck, 1980; Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; Carlin & McKinney, 1994; Friedenber, 1994, 1997; Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992; Hinck, 1993; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Kraus, 1962, 1979, 2000; Lanoue & Schrott, 1991; Martel, 1983; Schroeder, 2000; or Swerdlow, 1987) and television spots (books on television spots include Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Benoit, 1999; Biocca, 1991a, 1991b; Diamond & Bates, 1993; Jamieson, 1996; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991, 1997; Kaid & Johnston, 2001; Kaid, Nimmo, & Sanders, 1986; Kern, 1989; Patterson & McClure, 1976; Schultz, 2004; Thurber, Nelson, Dulio, 2000; or West, 2001). Some scholars have begun to investigate non-presidential campaigns (e.g., Herrnson, 1998; Jacobson, 2001; Kahn & Kenney, 1999). However, non-presidential debates are at this point relatively unexplored territory. This study contributes to our understanding of the content of these message forms.

Non-presidential debates are becoming increasingly common as candidates for the U.S. Senate and for state governors (and other offices as well) use this message form to communicate with voters. Almost twenty years ago Ornstein (1987) noted that “These days debates are the norm, not the exception, in congressional, mayoral, and gubernatorial politics” (p. 58). The visibility of these debates has also increased due to the national attention they received from C-SPAN, which televised over 100 of these campaign messages in 2002 and 2004. Although the fact that debates are almost always organized around questions means that one can argue that political debates have more in common with press conferences than academic debate (Auer, 1962; Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988; Zarefsky, 1992), there can be no doubt that these message forms have important advantages. First, debates feature the leading candidates discussing many of the same topics simultaneously, which helps voters choose between those contenders. Second, most debates are 60 to 90 minutes in length (although some are 30 minutes long) providing voters an extended opportunity to learn about the candidates, particularly compared with television spots. The fact that notes are forbidden, along with the fact that candidates may encounter an unanticipated question or remark from an opponent, could mean that despite preparation for these events debates may provide a more candid view of the candidates. Fourth, the direct confrontation provides candidates with an opportunity to correct misstatements or mischaracterizations, intentional or unintentional, from opponents. Such clash may give voters a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Another advantage of presidential debates is the huge audience: Tens of millions of voters tune in (unfortunately, we do not know the typical audience for non-presidential debates). Ornstein observed that “The impact of debates is heightened because they are frequently televised on both commercial and public channels. . . . Nearly 50% of the stations actually aired political debates” (p. 58). Finally, research establishes that presidential debates have important effects on voters, creating issue knowledge, influencing perceptions of the candidates’ character, and at times altering vote choice (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). No reason exists to doubt that non-presidential debates would influence viewers. Clearly, political debates merit scholarly attention.

Unfortunately, scholars have tended to neglect non-presidential debates. Only a handful of studies have investigated non-presidential debates. Ornstein (1987) offers a conceptual discussion of debates rather than a study of debate content or effects. Lichtenstein (1982) found that interest and viewership for presidential debates were higher than for non-presidential debates in 1980. However, he noted that “local debates were perceived as considerably more informative and influential to the viewers than the presidential debates” (p. 294). Pfau (1983) addressed

format in debates. None of this work has investigated factors which may influence the emphasis of issues addressed by non-presidential debate candidates. Petrocik's (1986, 2004) theory of issue ownership will guide this analysis.

Theoretical Underpinning

Petrocik (1996) observed that over time, each political party has gradually developed a reputation for being better able to deal with a select group of issues. Most voters, for example, express the belief that Democrats are better able to deal with education than Republicans; in contrast, most people think that Republicans can better handle foreign policy and war than Democrats. For example, Table 1 reveals that in 2002 Republicans were viewed by the public as better able to handle terrorism and crime, whereas Democrats were thought to be better able to deal with Social Security and health care.

Table 1

Which Political Party Do You Trust to Do a Better Job Handling this Issue?

	Democratic	Republican
Terrorism	30	51
Crime†	27	40
Social Security	50	33
Health care	50	35

Poll by ABC 9/23-26/02 except †Princeton Research Associates, 10/24-25/02. [insert

Assuming that public attitudes did not shift markedly in the meantime, these data indicate that President Bush, as a Republican, had an advantage on two issues but was at a disadvantage on two other topics in the 2004 campaign.

Petrocik predicts that Democratic and Republican candidates should exhibit a marked tendency to “emphasize issues on which they are advantaged and their opponents are less well regarded” (1996, p. 825). Presumably, the candidates can be rewarded if an agenda-setting effect (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004) occurs. That is, emphasizing an issue in campaign messages could make that issue more salient to voters. In the example of Table 1, Bush's advantage on terrorism should have a larger impact on the election outcome as the importance of terrorism to voters increases; in contrast, Kerry's advantage on jobs should play a more important role in citizens' vote choice if unemployment becomes more important to voters.

Furthermore, candidates may have more credibility -- and therefore be more persuasive -- when discussing the issues owned by their own political party. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) reported that television spots have greater impact when they discuss issues owned by the political party of the candidate sponsoring the advertisement (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Abbe, Goodliffe, Herrnson, and Patterson (2003) found that voters were most likely to support a “candidates who run on party-owned issues that are important to the voters” (p. 428). Simon (2002) found that candidates are less effective when discussing an opponent's rather than their own issues. So, candidates have motivation to stressing the issues owned by their political party.

Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003/2004) analyzed television spots and nomination acceptance addresses from 1952- 2000. These messages confirm the prediction that candidates emphasize the issues owned by their political party. Democrats discussed Democratic issues more than Republicans (47% to 34%) whereas Republicans emphasize their own issues more than Democrats (66% to 53%). These differences are significant overall and for both message forms. Benoit and Hansen (2004) extended this work to presidential general and primary debates. Candidates stressed their own party's issues more than did their opponents in both campaign phases. Both studies observed, however, that there was a tendency for candidates from both political parties to stress GOP-owned issues (although of course the Republicans emphasized these issues even more than Democrats). Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003/2004) noted that many Republican issues are national in scope, compared with Democratic issues.

Benoit and Airne (2005) extended issue ownership theory to non-presidential television spots from 2002. Overall, the study confirmed that non-presidential candidates had a tendency to emphasize the issues owned by their political party rather than emphasizing issues owned by the opposing party. However, as yet issue ownership has not been tested with non-presidential debates. Given the fact that debates revolve around questions, the topics addressed by candidates may be constrained in this message form. Candidates, of course, can ignore questions or devote part of their time to another topic, but still the topic of questions does have some influence on the topic of their answers. Given the fact that candidates are usually asked to address the same topics, that could mitigate attempts to emphasize the issues owned by their own political party. Nevertheless, we offer this prediction for issue emphasis in non-presidential debates:

Candidates in non-presidential debates will discuss issues owned by their own political party more than issues owned by the other party.

Sample

Unfortunately, no repository contains transcripts of all non-presidential debates; this means it is impossible for anyone to obtain a random sample of such debate transcripts. Accordingly, this study employed a convenience sample of non-presidential debate transcripts obtained mainly from the Internet (PBS, newspaper, and other webpages were consulted).¹ The sample consisted of 24 non-presidential debates: 12 from gubernatorial contests and 12 from senate races. For senate races, debates in the sample were held in Colorado, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Illinois (2004), Iowa, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee (2002), and California, Maine, Virginia, and Washington (2000). For governors' races, debates in the sample occurred in Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, and Utah (2004), California, Iowa, New York, and Pennsylvania (2002), and Montana, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Utah (2000, except a debate Virginia was held in 2001). All comments from moderators and questioners were deleted from the computer files containing transcripts of these debates, so each file consisted only of remarks made by the candidates. Then each debate transcript was divided into two files, one containing statements from the Democrat and one with utterances from the Republican (two debates included candidates representing other political parties; their statements were excluded from the analysis). Despite the difficulty of locating transcripts of non-presidential debates, the sample consists of 24 non-presidential debates (12 gubernatorial, 12 senate) featuring 48 different candidates from three campaigns (2000, 2002, and 2004) and held in 19 states – along with 23 presidential debates. This sample should provide a strong test of the hypotheses.

Method

The texts of these non-presidential debates were analyzed with Concordance, a computer

content analysis program which counts the frequency of lists words occurring in the texts analyzed. Use of computer content analysis means that questions of reliability do not arise in the coding. The validity of the analysis depends on the quality of the search term lists employed in the analysis. The search term lists were developed from using texts of presidential television spots from 1952-2000 (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Five Democratic (education, health care, jobs, poverty, environment) and five Republican (defense, foreign policy, spending/deficit, taxes, illegal drugs) were employed to test Issue Ownership Theory. A few additions were made to the search term list in order to reflect recent developments, such as adding “Laden” (Osama bin Laden) and “9/11” to the search list for national defense.

Results

The hypothesis predicted that political party affiliation would influence issue emphasis in non-presidential debates. Specifically, it was predicted that candidates from the two major parties would emphasize their own issues more than issues owned by the other party. This prediction was supported ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 20.18, p < .0001, \phi = .06$): Democrats discussed Democratic issues more than Republicans and Republicans addressed their issues more than Democrats. For instance, Democratic candidates mentioned health care 413 times; Republicans addressed this topic 279 times. In contrast, taxes occurred in Democratic statements 372 times, but in Republican utterances 502 times. To be clear, candidates from both parties discussed issues owned by both parties; however, there was a clear tendency to for candidates to emphasize the issues owned by their own party in these debates. See Table 2 for the aggregate data.

Table 2

Issue Ownership in 2000, 2002, 2004 Gubernatorial and Senate Debates

Candidates	Issue Emphasis	
	Democratic	Republican
Democratic	1414 (54%)	1189 (46%)
Republican	1251 (48%)	1352 (52%)

$\chi^2 (df = 1) = 20.18, p < .0001, V = .06$

Implications

This study has added to our understanding of factors that influence the production of candidate utterances in non-presidential debates. We know that presidential acceptances addresses and television spots (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003/2004) and presidential debates (Benoit & Hansen, 2004) stress the issues owned by the candidate’s political party. The same is true for non-presidential television spots (Benoit & Airne, 2005). Now, as predicted by Issue Ownership Theory, we know that in non-presidential debates Democrats have a tendency to stress Democratic issues more than Republicans, just as Republicans have a proclivity to dwell more on Republican issues than Democratic candidates. As illustrated in Table 1, political candidates have a “built-in” advantage with issues owned by their political party. If a candidate can increase the salience of those issues by stressing those topics, he or she will be advantaged at the polls. Furthermore, as Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) demonstrated, campaign messages are more persuasive when candidates discuss issues owned by their political party. Thus, persuasion is more likely on issues owned by a candidates’ party. So, it is not surprising that

gubernatorial and senate candidates have a proclivity to emphasize issues owned by their own political party.

Conclusion

Issues are an important component of political debates. Benoit (2003) demonstrated that candidates who stress policy or issues more than their opponents are significantly more likely to win elections than candidates who emphasize character more than opponents. This study has investigated the issue emphasis of non-presidential (gubernatorial and senate). Petrocik's (1986) theory of Issue Ownership explains that political candidates have an incentive to stress the issues owned by their own political party. In these debates, Democratic candidates emphasized Democratic issues more than did Republicans; Republican candidates stressed Republican issues more than Democrats. We know from previous research that presidential television spots and acceptance addresses (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003/2004) and debates follow issue ownership patterns (Benoit & Hansen, 2004) as do congressional and gubernatorial television spots (Benoit & Airne, 2005).

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