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Functional Federalism and Issue Emphasis in Political Television Spots

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Abstract

Peterson's (1995) theory of Functional Federalism recognizes that political offices at different levels of government have different responsibilities, so that senators are more likely to emphasize national issues than governors. This theory was tested and extended. First, 1651 political television spots from 2002 and 2004 gubernatorial, US Senate, and US House races were subjected to computer content analysis. As predicted, gubernatorial spots emphasized local issues (54%) more than national ones (46%) whereas House and Senate spots stressed national issues (63%, 64%) over local ones (37%, 36%). Second, we extended Functional Federalism by arguing that presidential TV spots should stress national issues even more than spots for the Senate and House. Then 687 presidential television spots (1980-2004) and 526 congressional spots (1980-2002) were also content analyzed. Both sets of ads emphasized national issues more than local issues; however, presidential ads stressed national issues (66%) even more than congressional ads (56%). These data support and extend the theory of functional federalism.

Most research into political campaign communication 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; Friedenberg, 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). Much less research has focused on non-presidential campaigns (e.g., Herrnson, 1998; Jacobson, 2001; Kahn & Kenney, 1999) and we know relatively little about the factors which influence the nature of political campaign messages. Accordingly, this study will extend our understanding of the content of these non-presidential campaign message forms.

Millions of dollars are spent on political advertising; Seeleye (2008), for example, reported that in the 2008 election \$2.6 billion was spent on TV spots. This money is likely not wasted; a meta-analysis of the effects of political television spots demonstrated that political advertising can instill issue knowledge, influence perceptions of candidate character, alter attitudes, create campaign interest, and are capable of influencing vote choice (Benoit, Leshner, & Chattopadhyay, 2007). There can be no doubt that televised political advertising merits scholarly attention.

We are beginning to develop an understanding of factors which influence the nature of content of political campaign messages. For example, most people tend to believe that Democrats can do a better job handling education and Social Security; Republicans are thought by most to be better at handling terrorism and crime. Accordingly, Democratic and Republican candidates tend to emphasize the issues “owned” by their political party (Petrocik; 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). We also have learned that messages produced by challengers are different from those by incumbents. Challengers tend to attack more than incumbents, and these two kinds of candidates refer to the past differently: Incumbents tend to acclaim their past accomplishments whereas challengers are prone to attack the incumbent’s past failures (Benoit, 2007). Message differences also arise by campaign phase: Candidates in general election campaigns tend to attack more than primary candidates; primary candidates are prone to discuss character more (and policy less) than contenders in general campaigns (Benoit, 2007). However, it is also possible that level of office influences the nature of political campaign messages. This study investigates the predictions of the theory of Functional Federalism, explicated next.

Theoretical Underpinning: Functional Federalism

America adopted a federalist system that allocates different responsibilities to elected officials at different levels of government. Peterson (1995) explained that modern federalism means “that each level of government had its own independently elected political leaders and its own separate taxing and spending capacity” (p. 10). He distinguished between two groups of issues, developmental (local) and redistributive (national). “Developmental programs provide the physical and social infrastructure necessary to facilitate a country’s economic development” (p. 17). Developmental policies concern transportation, sanitation, and public utilities (physical infrastructure), as well as police, fire, public health, and education (social infrastructure). On the

other hand, “Redistributive programs reallocate societal resources from the ‘haves’ to the ‘have-nots’” (p. 17). These issues include social welfare programs for the elderly, the poor, the unemployed, single-parent families, and those who are ill. Peterson argued that the national government has primary responsibility for redistributive policies whereas state and local government mostly implement developmental policies. He reported that state and local government spends about twice as much as the federal government on developmental policies; the federal government, in contrast, spends about three times as much as state and local government on redistributive policies.

Atkeson and Partin (2001) explained the implications for political communication of functional federalism:

National-level politicians should emphasize in their work and communications with citizens. . . a more heavily redistributive and international agenda. In contrast, state leaders and state elected officials should emphasize in their work and communications with citizens. . . a more localized, state agenda oriented around developmental policies such as education, taxes, infrastructure, and crime. (p. 796)

Similarly, Stein (1990) argued that

Voters are aware of the differences in functional responsibilities assigned to local, state, and federal governments. Specifically, they understand that responsibility for state economic conditions depends significantly on the actions of the national government and market factors. Unemployment, interest rates, [and] economic growth... are largely, if not exclusively, the domain and responsibility of the national government. (p. 34)

Stein reported public opinion poll data indicating that economic issues are thought by voters to be important reasons for senatorial, but not gubernatorial, vote choice. He also found in the 1982 elections that “Senatorial voting exhibits clear and unambiguous economic voting” (p. 50); evidence for economic voting in gubernatorial elections is less strong.

Atkeson and Partin (2001) analyzed 533 Senate and gubernatorial political advertisements from 1986, reporting that developmental issues, such as education, were more likely to be found in political advertisements for gubernatorial (local office) than senatorial (national office) candidates. On the other hand, redistributive issues such as the elderly and foreign policy were more likely to be used in senatorial than gubernatorial ads. They also reported that newspaper coverage tended to follow the predictions of functional federalism. Tidmarch, Hyman, and Sorkin (1984) analyzed campaign coverage from newspapers in 1982, concluding that “the national policy agenda, while visible, is a demonstrably smaller presence in gubernatorial campaign coverage than in House and Senate coverage” (p. 1239). Finally, Henson and Benoit (2009) tested functional federalism in election debates for governor and the U.S. Senate. They found that gubernatorial debates emphasized state or local (developmental) issues more than Senate debates (75% to 47%); in contrast, Senate debates stressed national (redistributive) issues more than gubernatorial debates (53% to 25%). This comports well with the theory of functional federalism. They also reported that presidential debates stressed national issues more than Senate debates, explaining that, unlike individual Senators, the president has a national constituency. Henson and Benoit (2009) also found that presidential debates discussed national issues even more, and local issues less, than senate debates.

We extend this study to political advertising. First, we investigate political advertisements for three non-presidential offices (2002 and 2004), examining House ads as well as those for the Senate and governor.

H1. Candidates for Senate and House will use their television spots to discuss national issues more, and local issues less, than candidates in gubernatorial races.

Second, we compare television spots from presidential (1980-2004) and congressional (1980-2002) campaigns. We predict that:

H2. Candidates for president will use their television spots to discuss national issues even more than candidates for U.S. congress.

Benoit (2003) found that candidates who discussed policy, or issues, more than their opponents in their television spots were more likely to win elections; those who stressed character more than their opponents had a tendency to lose elections. Thus, understanding the factors that influence the issue content of political campaign messages is an important project.

Samples

Unfortunately, no repository contains the transcripts of all political advertising. This means it is not possible to obtain a random sample of spots (or guarantee that a sample is representative). We used two samples of Democratic and Republican political spot texts which were obtained from three sources: candidate webpages, the *National Journal* webpages, and video-taping spots from broadcast television. The first hypothesis was tested with a sample of 554 gubernatorial, 451 U.S. House, and 646 U.S. Senate ads from 2002 and 2004. Thirdly, we used a sample of 687 presidential ads (1980-2004) and 526 congressional (both House and Senate) ads (1980-2002) to test the second prediction. These samples should provide a strong test of the two hypotheses. So, we extend current research by adding House ads, examining ads for more recent years than existing research, and comparing congressional and presidential ads.

Method

The texts of these non-presidential debates were analyzed with Concordance, a computer content analysis program that counts the frequency of a list of 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 adapted, following the analyses of Atkeson and Partin (2001) and Stein (1990), from previous computer content analysis of issue ownership research and developed from the texts of presidential television spots from 1952-2000 (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003-2004). Five national issues (economy, national defense, foreign policy, health care, elderly) and five state/local issues (education, environment, taxes, illegal drugs, and crime) were employed for this analysis (of course there are, for example, local and national economic issues; local versus national issues should be considered tendencies or emphases rather than exclusive to one level or another of elective office). For example, the search term list for "economy" included such words as jobs, unemployed, inflation, prices, recession, deficit, consumer. A few additions were made to the search term list in order to reflect recent developments, such as adding "Laden" (for Osama bin Laden) and "9/11" to the search list for national defense. Concordance counts the number of times each search term occurs in selected texts.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that Senate and House ads would discuss national issues more, and local issues less, than gubernatorial ads. As Table 1 reveals, this hypothesis was supported. Terms related to national issues occurred more frequently in House (63%) and Senate (64%) ads than in gubernatorial spots (46%); conversely, local issue terms were more common in gubernatorial (54%) than House (37%) or Senate (36%) commercials. Statistical analysis reveals that these proportions are significantly different ($\chi^2 [df = 2] = 291.63, p < .0001, \phi = .17$).

Furthermore, as one would suspect from the nearly identical percentages, there is no difference in the issue emphasis of House and Senate ads ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 1.79, p > .18$). So, televised political advertising from the 2002 campaign supports the predictions from Functional Federalism. We have quantified this relationship as well, discovering that with this sample of texts gubernatorial ads discussed local issues about 17-18% more (and national issues the same amount less) than congressional commercials.

Table 1.

Issue Topics of Gubernatorial, House, and Senate Television Spots

	Governor	House	Senate
National Issues	1526 (46%)	1603 (63%)	2405 (64%)
Local Issues	1812 (54%)	952 (37%)	1328 (36%)

Sample: 554 Gubernatorial, 451 U.S. House, and 646 U.S. Senate spots

The second hypothesis predicted that national issues would be emphasized even more by presidential candidates than candidates for the U.S. congress. This prediction was confirmed. As Table 2 indicates, candidates for all offices (president and the combined sample of Senate and House ads) stressed national issues more than local issues. However, television spots from presidential candidates employed national issue terms more than ads from congressional candidates: 66% to 56%. Of course, congressional spots discussed local issues more than presidential commercials (44% to 34%). These differences are statistically significant ($\chi^2 [df = 1] = 74.4, p < .0001, \phi = .1$). Presidential candidates discuss national issues about 10% more (and local issues about 10% less) than congressional candidates.

Table 2.

Issue Topics of Presidential and Congressional Television Spots

	President 1980-2004	Congress 1980-2002
National Issues	2670 (66%)	2019 (56%)
Local Issues	1404 (34%)	1593 (44%)

Sample: 687 Presidential and 526 Congressional spots

Implications

This study has added to our understanding of factors that influence the topics of candidate utterances in non-presidential television spots, reinforcing Henson and Benoit's (2009) study of political debates. Now, as predicted by the theory of Functional Federalism, we know that candidates who are running for the U.S. congress are prone to stress national issues more than candidates for governor. In contrast, gubernatorial contenders are more likely to emphasize local issues. Of course, candidates for all three offices discussed both local and national issues (and, as mentioned above, issues have national or local emphases; no issue is exclusively pertinent to one level). Nevertheless, for example, those who were running for congress have a reason to discuss Social Security in their political campaign messages because Congress regulates Social Security taxes and benefits. Governors, on the other hand, do not deal with this program and there is less incentive for them to discuss Social Security. Therefore, it makes sense for congressional candidates to discuss national issues more than gubernatorial candidates in political messages. On the other hand, most funding and policy for education are from state and local government, so it is reasonable for those running for governor to stress local issues more in

ads than congressional candidates. Those citizens who have a basic understanding of the offices in question may not be terribly impressed by a candidate for governor who focused a large proportion of his or her campaign messages on, for example, the war in Iraq. We have also quantified the extent of issue emphasis in our sample of advertisements.

The issue emphasis in Senate and gubernatorial political spots follow the spending patterns of each level of government identified by Peterson (1995). The federal government spends more time and money on redistributive policies than state and local government and, accordingly, candidates for the House and Senate discuss redistributive issues in TV advertisements more than candidates for governorships. In contrast, state and local governments spend more on developmental policies than the federal government and candidates for governor discuss developmental policies in television spots more than those vying for seats in the U.S. Senate.

We also extended the theory of Functional Federalism by comparing the issue emphasis of congressional and presidential advertisements. We found that presidential ads stress national issues even more than congressional spots. This is reasonable because only presidents have a national constituency; senators and members of congress represent citizens of a state or an even smaller area. Thus, both the office (national versus state) or responsibilities of the office as well as constituency (the entire country versus a state or congressional district) appear to influence the content of political campaign messages.

Conclusion

Issues are an important component of political campaign messages. This study investigated the issue emphasis of non-presidential (gubernatorial and Senate) televised political advertisements. Not surprisingly, the responsibilities of the office influence the content of political campaign discourse. Besides confirming the tendencies predicted by Functional Federalism, we have also *quantified* the difference in emphasis in these samples. Note that the current study includes TV spots from House races, extending the study of campaign debates (Henson & Benoit, 2007), which only examined Senate (and gubernatorial) debates.

This state of affairs is a healthy one for voters. America's political system is a federal one, in which different levels of political office have different responsibilities. Citizens reflecting on their gubernatorial vote most need information about how the candidates will deal with local problems – and gubernatorial television spots emphasize local issues. In contrast, citizens need to know how senators and members of congress will legislate national issues – and once again their television spots emphasize those issues more than local issues. Finally, the president is the only political candidate in the U.S. with a national electorate, and we see television spots for this office address national issues more than spots for congress (or governor, for that matter). Thus, these campaign messages stress the issues most relevant to their respective voters.

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