The Revelation Incentive for Issue Engagement in Campaigns

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Introduction

Motivation

- Why should parties ever campaign on unfavorable issues?

  - Issues on which most voters prefer other parties' positions.

  - Or, issues which most voters trust other parties to handle better.

- Standard theories suggest parties should never do this.

  - 'Saliency theory', 'issue ownership theory', 'heresthetics'. Budge and Farlie 1983; Riker 1993; Petrocik 1996; de Sio and Weber 2014.

  - Most existing models cannot explain why parties discuss unfavorable issues. Austen-Smith 1993; Simon 2002; Aragonès et al. 2015.

- These theories suggest parties should mostly "talk past each other".

  - E.g. models fail to produce 'issue engagement' when parties own different issues. Amorós and Puy 2013; Egorov 2015.

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Parties do frequently talk about the same issues . . .

TABLE 2 Issue Convergence in Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000

| | On Policy Topics Only | | On All Topics | |
Year	Presidential Candidates Only	All Campaign Spokespersons	Presidential Candidates Only	All Campaign Spokespersons
1960	75.7	81.3	77.1	80.5
1964	70.9	77.9	72.0	80.3
1968	75.8	78.3	71.8	73.3
1972	79.8	77.2	63.3	72.5
1976	76.9	75.7	70.9	73.9
1980	79.2	74.8	76.1	76.7
1984	77.4	79.6	71.0	79.1
1988	71.7	70.8	69.5	72.4
1992	73.7	76.6	72.1	76.9
1996	64.5	68.7	64.3	76.8
2000	82.2	80.7	77.5	78.0
Mean	75.3	76.5	71.4	76.4
Number of observations	5,042	8,660	7,405	1,4639

The cell entries are convergence scores, which can range from 0 to 100, as defined in the text.

Motivating evidence

- In both US and multiparty contexts, parties frequently focus on the same issues. Also Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006; Meyer and Wagner 2015.

- Especially if issue is salient to voters.

  - E.g. Kaplan, Park and Ridout (2006) identify a sizable effect of issue salience on emphasis strategy in Senate races.

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Overview of argument

- Parties face 'salience incentive' to emphasize favourable issues.

  - Increases salience of these issues for voters.

  - Voters vote based on the issues that are salient to them.

  - Main incentive considered in existing literature.

- Parties face 'revelation incentive' to emphasize already salient issues.

  - Reveals party position to potentially sympathetic voters.

  - Increases support for the party because voters dislike uncertainty.

- Party emphasis strategy determined by combined effect of these incentives.

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Model

The modeling framework

- Two parties: $1, 2$; two issues: X, Y.

- Nature chooses position $\in \mathbf{R}$ for each party on each issue
  - Known to both parties but unknown to voters.

- Each party j chooses level of emphasis e_j^K on each issue K.
  - To maximize vote share.
  - Subject to constraint $e_j^X + e_j^Y = 1$.

- Voters have ideal points on both issues, according to distribution F.

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Voters

- Voters see at most one party's campaign on one issue.

- Three types of voter: X-focused, Y-focused and impressionable.

    - Exogenous proportions of each.

    - K-focused can only see and care about campaigns on issue K.

    - Impressionable can see campaigns about either issue.

        - Care only about issue on which they see a party campaign.

        ⇒ Campaigning can increase salience of an issue.

- Probability voter sees party j's campaign on issue K an increasing function of e_j^K.

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Information and vote choice

- If voter i sees:

  - One party's campaign.
    - She sees that party's position with prob 1.
    - She sees other party's position with prob $\gamma \in [0, \frac{1}{2})$.

  - No campaigns.
    - She sees both parties' positions with prob γ.

- If voter i sees:

  - Both parties' positions.
    - She votes for closest party.

  - One party's position.
    - She votes for that party (ambiguity aversion).

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Results

Key results

1. There exists a unique equilibrium where each party places some emphasis on each issue.

2. Each party j's equilibrium emphasis on issue K is increasing in:

   - The relative popularity of j's position on K.
   - The relative (exogenous) salience of K.

3. The more impressionable voters there are, the more parties 'talk past each other'.

4. If an issue has sufficiently high exogenous salience, both parties will primarily campaign on it regardless of their positions.

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Extensions

1. Voters maximize expected utility rather than being ambiguity averse.

    • Numerical results only.

2. Allow parties to communicate imprecisely about their positions.

    • Parties always choose to be slightly (but not too) vague about their policy positions.
    • Parties are more imprecise if their position is more unpopular.

Model results for party emphasis mostly generalize to both cases.

• E.g. we still find that parties usually emphasize unpopular positions to some degree, especially on salient issues.

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   - Numerical results only.

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- A model that can account for key empirical patterns in party emphasis decisions.

  - Parties disproportionally emphasize favorable issues.

  - Parties emphasize unfavorable issues when salient.

- Parties trade off two key incentives:

  - Salience incentive: increase importance of an issue for voters.

    $\Rightarrow$ Produces tendency to emphasize favourable issues.

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