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Partisan Issue Linkages in Presidential Campaign Speeches: A Case Study of Abortion

Ashutosh Mishra

University of Pennsylvania, mashu@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

This study examined how presidential candidates used partisan issue linkages to discuss their abortion views over the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. It qualitatively examined 64 speeches, town halls, and interviews in which candidates spoke about abortion to identify trends in their rhetoric. It also measured the frequencies with which candidates used partisan messages, specific vocabulary, and issue linkages. As candidates employed stronger and more partisan issue linkages across these three elections, they transformed abortion from a stand-alone issue to one entrenched in a partisan policy package. The development of Planned Parenthood as a symbol for pro-choice positions in 2012 enabled candidates to make different and more partisan issue linkages. This study further identified candidates' changing strategies for discussing abortion, including differences along party lines and over time. These findings carry implications for politicians, voters, and scholars alike. They suggest that the abortion debate is dynamic and deserving of ongoing research. Future studies on partisan rhetoric should account for issue linkages to more accurately examine trends in partisanship.

Keywords

Partisanship, Political Rhetoric, Abortion, Presidential Campaign, Issue Linkage, Partisan Language, Political Science, Social Sciences, Rogers M. Smith, Meghan Crnic, Crnic, Meghan, Smith, Rogers M.

Disciplines

American Politics

Partisan Issue Linkages in Presidential Campaign Speeches: A Case Study of Abortion

By

Ashutosh Mishra

Advisors: Meghan Crnic and Rogers M. Smith

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of

**Bachelor of Arts Degree
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College of Arts and Sciences
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Contents

Acknowledgments.....	3
Abstract:.....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: Partisan Issue Linkages as a Political Tool	13
Chapter 3: Aggregate Trends by Party and Election.....	19
Chapter 4: 2008 Election	27
Chapter 5: 2012 Election	38
Chapter 6: 2016 Election	47
Chapter 7: Discussion	55
Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	61
Bibliography	64
Appendix.....	70

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Abstract:

This study examined how presidential candidates used partisan issue linkages to discuss their abortion views over the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. It qualitatively examined 64 speeches, town halls, and interviews in which candidates spoke about abortion to identify trends in their rhetoric. It also measured the frequencies with which candidates used partisan messages, specific vocabulary, and issue linkages. As candidates employed stronger and more partisan issue linkages across these three elections, they transformed abortion from a stand-alone issue to one entrenched in a partisan policy package. The development of Planned Parenthood as a symbol for pro-choice positions in 2012 enabled candidates to make different and more partisan issue linkages. This study further identified candidates' changing strategies for discussing abortion, including differences along party lines and over time. These findings carry implications for politicians, voters, and scholars alike. They suggest that the abortion debate is dynamic and deserving of ongoing research. Future studies on partisan rhetoric should account for issue linkages to more accurately examine trends in partisanship.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A common belief among Americans is that the current state of politics reflects an uncharacteristically high degree of partisanship. This is perhaps unsurprising given the media drama illuminating a gridlocked Congress, government shutdown, and investigation of President Trump. While such events suggest a growing divide within government, this wave of partisanship has infiltrated the public domain as well. In a 2014 survey of 10,000 Americans, the Pew Research Center found that Americans were more divided along ideological lines than during any other time in the past two decades.¹ Clashes between Democrats and Republicans capture the nation's attention and range from fistfights at presidential campaign rallies to debates over NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. Partisanship among politicians and the public is a pressing concern and warrants serious investigation.

Political Scientists have found evidence reinforcing the idea that the government and public have become more divided in recent years. Scholars have found that voters have more strongly aligned themselves along party lines in the 21st century. Since the year 2000, voters exhibited historically high levels of party loyalty, straight-ticket voting, partisan issue alignment, negative perceptions of the other party, and differences in presidential approval.² This trend has occurred in tandem with an increasing ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans in

¹ Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," last modified on June 12, 2014, accessed on March 26, 2019, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

² For a thorough literature review on the increasing partisanship in the American electorate, see Abramowitz and Webster in Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US elections in the 21st century," *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016): 12-22.; Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "All politics is national: The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US house and senate elections in the 21st century," in *Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association Conference*, (2015): 16-19.; Mark D. Brewer, "The rise of partisanship and the expansion of partisan conflict within the American electorate," *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2005): 219-229.; Brian Newman and Emerson Siegle, "Polls and elections: the polarized presidency: depth and breadth of public partisanship," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2010): 342-363.; Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (September 2008): 408-446.

both chambers of Congress.³ Their ideological divide also manifests through increasing party alignment in roll call votes in both chambers and Senator's use of social media.⁴ Overall, scholars have agreed that partisan and ideological polarization have increased in government and the electorate in recent years.

One factor contributing to these trends has been the use of partisan rhetoric. As such, this study focuses on the partisan rhetoric of presidential candidates. More so than other political stages, presidential elections are exceptionally visible events during which candidates use their rhetorical skills to communicate directly to the public. For over a year leading up to elections, candidates tour the country giving speeches to win voters. Media coverage further expands the reach of candidates' messaging to a national audience. Each candidates' language is well-rehearsed and advances deliberate communication strategies. Regardless of whether candidates develop novel rhetorical strategies or adopt existing ones, they influence discourse by spreading a common language across a mass audience. As such, campaign speeches provide an excellent medium for analyzing high-impact rhetoric and will be the focus of this study.

While the literature suggests that politicians have developed more partisan ideologies, two studies argue that partisanship has decreased in presidential candidates' speeches.⁵ Rhodes and Albert's analysis of presidential campaign speeches from 1952-2012 and Jarvis's analysis of

³ Stephen Ansolabehere, James M. Snyder Jr, and Charles Stewart III, "The effects of party and preferences on congressional roll-call voting," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* (2001): 533-572.; Sean M. Theriault, *Party polarization in congress*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.; Joseph Bafumi and Michael C. Herron, "Leapfrog representation and extremism: A study of American voters and their members in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 519-542.; Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, "Finding the common good in an era of dysfunctional governance," *Daedalus* 142, no. 2 (2013): 15-24.; Megan K. Kraushaar, *Secrecy and Democracy: The Conflict between American Ideals and American Institutions*, US Army School for Advanced Military Studies Fort Leavenworth United States, 2014.

⁴ Barbara Sinclair, *Party wars: Polarization and the politics of national policy making*, Vol. 10. University of Oklahoma Press, 2014.; Theriault, *Party polarization in congress*, 2008.; Annelise Russell, "U.S. Senators on Twitter: Asymmetric Party Rhetoric in 140 Characters," *American politics research* 46, no. 4 (2018): 695-723.

⁵ S. E. Jarvis, "Partisan patterns in presidential campaign speeches, 1948-2000," *Communication Quarterly* 52, no 4 (2004): 403-419.; Johnathan H. Rhodes and Zachary Albert, "The transformation of partisan rhetoric in American presidential campaigns, 1952-2012" *Party Politics* 23, no 5 (2017): 566-577.

speeches from 1948-2000 show that the frequency of partisan references has been historically high among Democratic candidates and low among Republican candidates. Over time, however, the frequency of partisan references between the two parties became more similar, with a dramatic decline in references among Democrats and a slight increase among Republicans.

Given the concurring results in these two studies, either partisan rhetoric has genuinely declined in recent speeches, or it has taken a new form. I argue in favor of the latter. Because both studies employ deductive quantitative methods for capturing language trends over time, they identify partisan rhetoric solely based on mentions of party names, ideological labels, and select other keywords. These keywords are necessarily pre-defined and fail to capture manifestations of partisan rhetoric that do not include them. In contrast, candidates could use other rhetoric tools to deliver partisan appeals without named references to parties, candidates, or ideological labels.

In this study, I look within a subset of the recent presidential campaign speeches (2008, 2012, and 2016) to qualitatively identify different expressions of partisan rhetoric. I selected the issue of abortion as a case study because it has been a historically partisan issue whose discussions would likely contain high levels of partisan language. I argue that through their campaign rhetoric, recent presidential candidates entrenched abortion as part of a partisan package by linking it to other partisan issues. I define issue-linkages as the simultaneous discussion of two or more issues. While direct references to the opposing party by name have declined, this finding suggests that partisan rhetoric still increased in a different, previously uncaptured form. This finding further nuances scholars' understanding of partisan rhetoric by suggesting that candidates use issue linkages as rhetorical tools for delivering partisan appeals. It

also offers valuable insights on recent developments in the abortion debate, demonstrating that the issue's discussion is still dynamic and worth ongoing investigation.

Abortion as a Case Study

I examine the issue of abortion as a case study in partisan language. Abortion makes for an excellent case study due to its clear impact and narrow domain. Typical to abortion is the following question: Are you pro-choice or pro-life? The question is simple, yet its weight and salience cannot be understated. It suggests that abortion opinions have developed into powerful identities that can be activated to drive voter behavior. Abortion is such an intense subject among some that it can even lead to single-issue voting. These views have also become proxies for ideological and political party affiliation. From a researcher's perspective, the language used to discuss the subject is relatively limited and allows for easily programmed text identification for qualitative review. Given the gravity of abortion in the political context, it is not only important to understand how candidates have utilized the issue, but it also to untangle the implications of this rhetoric for shaping voter perceptions of the issue.

Historically, interest groups played a powerful role in making abortion a partisan issue by pushing both parties to either ideological extreme. Even after the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in 1973, political parties did not reflect a clear alignment on the issue until 1980.⁶ The Republican platform decisively opposed abortion when conservative religious interest groups influenced them to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment and appoint pro-life judges.⁷ Since then, pro-life and pro-choice interest groups continued lobbying the Republican and Democratic

⁶ Edward G. Carmines, Jessica C. Gerrity, and Michael W. Wagner, "How Abortion Became a Partisan Issue: Media Coverage of the Interest Group-Political Party Connection," *Politics & Policy* 38, no. 6 (2010): 1135-1158.

⁷ Ibid.

parties respectively. Congressional voting from 1976-2000 reflects growing trends of partisan coherence on abortion bills among politicians.⁸ These politicians also publicly endorse their party views. Media coverage of these public endorsements joined party alignment with abortion stances in the public light, thereby influencing partisan issue alignment among the public.⁹ Furthermore, party activists and convention delegates from both sides also began to reflect their party's abortion attitudes to the public beginning in the 1980s.¹⁰ Both communication pathways – media coverage of politicians and interest groups alongside party activists – led to the rise of partisan issue alignment among the public, though the degree of partisanship was always greater among politicians.¹¹ Since previous studies had come to a consensus over the decline in such language, I expected challenges in finding strong evidence to construct my argument. Abortion was more likely than other issues to be discussed by candidates using partisan language given its history.

Abortion is also a particularly salient issue for the public. Abortion issues were found to significantly influence outcomes at the national, state, local, and gubernatorial elections.¹² A study of 1989 and 1990 gubernatorial state exit polls finds that pro-choice and pro-life positions were a significant predictor of voter choice in nine of ten states studied.¹³ Abortion position had a stronger relationship with vote choice than state economic conditions in eight

⁸ Douglas W. Jaenicke, "Abortion and Partisanship in the US Congress, 1976-2000: Increasing Partisan Cohesion and Differentiation," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 1 (Apr 1, 2002): 1-22.

⁹ Carmines, Gerrity and Wagner, "How abortion became a partisan issue," 2010.

¹⁰ Edward G. Carmines and James Woods, "The Role of Party Activists in the Evolution of the Abortion Issue," *Political Behavior* 24, no. 4 (2002): 361-377.

¹¹ Carmines, Gerrity and Wagner, 2010.; Carmines and Woods, "The Role of Party Activists," 2002.

¹² Elizabeth Adell Cook, Ted G. Jelen, and Clyde Wilcox, "Issue Voting in Gubernatorial Elections: Abortion and Post-Webster Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 56, no. 1 (1994): 187-199.; Elizabeth Adell Cook, Ted G. Jelen, and Clyde Wilcox, "State Political Cultures and Public Opinion about Abortion," *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (Dec, 1993): 771.; Paul Goren and Christopher Chapp, "Moral Power: How Public Opinion on Culture War Issues Shapes Partisan Predispositions and Religious Orientations," *The American Political Science Review* 111, no. 1 (2017): 110-128.

¹³ Cook, Jelen and Wilcox, "Issue Voting," 1994.

states and partisanship in one. Furthermore, abortion views impact opinion formation at a deep level. Results from panel study from 1992-2012 suggest that culture war issues of gay rights and abortion were comparable to religious and partisan identification in motivating opinions.¹⁴ The issue has also been empirically shown to drive party switching in the short and long-term. Interestingly, in the short term, pro-life Democrats vote for Republicans more than pro-choice Republicans vote for Democrats.¹⁵ This suggests that the issue of abortion is more salient for pro-life individuals. These studies reinforce the importance of studying such a strong motivating subject and reveal insights regarding the public's psychology.

Politicians also have a significant influence over how the public perceives the issue. While the crux of my study does not examine changes in public opinion, its results carry implications for shifting views that should be subsequently investigated. A series of studies on abortion and issue politics more broadly suggest that public opinions are elite-driven rather than organic public shifts.¹⁶ This is evident from Carmine's finding that partisanship is stronger among politicians and party activists than the public, and that partisanship among both has increased since the 1980s.¹⁷ The elite-driven nature allows me to study media and public speeches as the medium for opinion shaping. Furthermore, studies find that national abortion discussions significantly influence votes at state and local elections, thereby allowing me to focus my case studies on them.¹⁸ Lastly, the effect of repeated exposure to messages from the

¹⁴ Goren and Chapp, "Moral Power," 2017.

¹⁵ Mitchell Killian and Clyde Wilcox, "Do Abortion Attitudes Lead to Party Switching?" *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2008): 561-573.

¹⁶ Carmines, Gerrity and Wagner, 2010.; Carmines and Woods, 2002.; Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson. *Issue evolution: Race and the transformation of American politics*. Princeton University Press, 1989.

¹⁷ Carmines, Gerrity and Wagner, 2010.; Carmines and Woods, 2002.

¹⁸ Cook, Jelen, Wilcox, 1993.; Jongho Roh and Donald P. Haider-Markel, "All Politics is Not Local: National Forces in State Abortion Initiatives," *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2003): 15-31.

same individuals and organizations does not significantly diminish over time.¹⁹ As a result, recurring rhetorical themes can still be considered impactful strategies with the potential to shape public opinion. These insights allow me to justify my approach of studying messages from influencers and focus on national level politics.

Methods

This study analyzes campaign communications for the general election candidates from the Republican and Democratic parties for the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections. The campaign communications analyzed cover both primary and general election materials. I collected my primary data by web scraping from UCSB's American Presidency Project's online database of speeches.²⁰ Despite being categorized as speeches, these documents also include a mix of town halls and live-audience interviews that I have included in my analysis. The dataset is publicly available and supplies a nearly comprehensive set of material. I subsequently used NVivo 12 software to filter only those communications with keywords relevant to abortion.²¹ The search resulted in 64 relevant documents, which I manually coded for qualitative themes in the text surrounding the keywords. I then analyzed the frequencies of partisan rhetoric, keywords, and issue linkage occurrences by party, election year, and candidate.

I coded each text as having partisan, non-partisan, or bipartisan rhetoric. I considered sections as having partisan rhetoric if they contrasted the two parties or candidates through issue positions or named mentions of the opposing party, candidate, or ideological name. I coded text

¹⁹ Danette Brickman and David A. M. Peterson, "Public Opinion Reaction to Repeated Events: Citizen Response to Multiple Supreme Court Abortion Decisions," *Political Behavior* 28, no. 1 (2006): 87-112.

²⁰ The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

²¹ Full query code: abortion OR fetus OR reproductive OR contraception OR Roe OR (pro-choice) OR (pro-life) OR (planned AND parenthood). After experimenting with additional keywords, these provided the most expansive, yet relevant selection for analysis.

as non-partisan if it contained no such references. Bipartisan rhetoric discussed both parties' views, but only to suggest the possibility of cooperation. The final list of linkages included references to health care, economic policy, various rights, religion, defense, gun ownership, and gay rights. Given the inductive process for identifying strategies, I thoroughly reviewed previously coded work before recategorizing themes.

Lastly, I reorganized the data chronologically and by candidate to capture a complete picture of their rhetorical trends. Taken together, I constructed a narrative development in rhetoric across the three election cycles to highlight key developments in partisan rhetoric within the context of the campaign.

Roadmap

I structure this article into eight short chapters. In Chapter 2, I draw on existing literature on partisan rhetoric to establish issue linkages as a tool for delivering partisan messages. In Chapter 3, I use frequency measures to explain aggregate trends in partisanship, word choice, and issue linkages by party and election year. I elaborate on these trends in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, where I qualitatively analyze candidates' speeches for the 2008, 2012, and 2016 election cycles. Each chapter not only presents a snapshot of how candidates discussed abortion that year, but also synthesizes how they transformed it from a stand-alone issue into one enveloped in a partisan policy package. Lastly, I explore the implications and limitations of my findings in Chapter 7 before offering concluding thoughts in Chapter 8.

Chapter 2: Partisan Issue Linkages as a Political Tool

Scholars of partisanship have established that partisan rhetoric is a powerful tool for influencing people's beliefs. They show that people can rely on partisan cues from leaders to inform their values and subsequently their policy positions.²² Scholars have further advanced the understanding of each sides' rhetorical tools by examining their implications in theory and practice. This chapter situates the concept of partisan issue linkages within the broader scholarly discussion of partisan rhetoric. In particular, it draws on the ideas of issue ownership and issue framing to justify how linkages embody similar characteristics. This discussion contributes to scholarly understanding of partisan rhetoric by outlining how issue linkages operate as vehicles for partisan appeals.

Issue ownership

The theory of issue ownership provides the basis on which rhetorical tools like issue frames and issue linkages operate. Scholars in the 1980s and 90s posited that the American electorate trusts each party more across different issues.²³ Issues on which parties are more trusted are considered to be "owned" by them. In other words, they were seen as having more authority in discussing them. Scholars have considered the Democratic party to own social welfare issues including health care, Social Security, and equal rights.²⁴ In contrast, the Republican party owned issues within foreign policy, national defense,

²² Edward G. Carmines and James H. Kuklinski, "Incentives, opportunities, and the logic of public opinion in American political representation," *Information and democratic processes* (1990): 240-68.; Michael Bang Peterson, Rune Slothuus, and Lise Togeby, "Political parties and value consistency in public opinion formation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2010): 530-550.

²³ Shanto Iyengar, "Television news and citizens' explanations of national affairs," *American Political Science Review* 81, no. 3 (1987): 815-831.; Shanto Iyengar and Nicholas A. Valentino, "Who says what? Source credibility as a mediator of campaign advertising," *Elements of reason: Cognition, choice, and the bounds of rationality* (2000): 108-129.; John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (1996): 825-850.; John R. Petrocik, William L. Benoit, and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue Ownership and Presidential Campaigning, 1952-2000," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (2003): 599-626.

²⁴ Petrocik, "Issue Ownership," 1996.

economic policy, and that protect moral values.²⁵ The issues that each party owns are subject to change over time and are heavily dependent on the record of each party's last administration.²⁶

Issue ownership by a candidate's party allows them to appeal to voters and potentially change their perceptions. As Petrocik suggests in his outline of the theory, "mere association with a party is an indicator of an ability to implement superior policies and programs for dealing with the problems owned by the party."²⁷ In other words, the party lends a degree of credibility to its nominee, and the nominee can leverage this credibility to sway voters. In practice, this credibility is akin to candidates being seen as better able to "handle" matters arising in a certain issue domain. Since people rely on political leaders for information to inform their values and positions, presidential candidates who are so heavily covered in the media have a high potential to use their credibility to influence public opinion.

Issue framing

One shortcoming of the issue ownership framework at its early stages was that it failed to explain *how* politicians discussed their issues and, more importantly, how they discussed issues that their parties did not own. This gap was especially problematic because other work suggested that, since the 1960s, candidates gradually shifted to more frequently discussing the same issues.²⁸ By applying ideas from the fields of economics and psychology, scholars demonstrated that politicians could persuade audiences by emphasizing some perspectives of an issue over others.²⁹ This practice is called issue framing, and it essentially allows candidates to talk about the same issues through different lenses. Fundamentally,

²⁵ Petrocik, "Issue Ownership," 1996.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 601.

²⁸ Lee Sigelman and Emmett H. Buell Jr, "Avoidance or engagement? Issue convergence in US presidential campaigns, 1960–2000," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2004): 650-661.

²⁹ William G. Jacoby, "Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 750-767.; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice," *Science* 211, no. 4481 (1981): 453-458.; Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Rational choice and the framing of decisions," In *Multiple Criteria Decision Making and Risk Analysis Using Microcomputers*, pp. 81-126. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 1989.; Richard R. Lau, Richard A. Smith, and Susan T. Fiske, "Political beliefs, policy interpretations, and political persuasion," *The Journal of Politics* 53, no. 3 (1991): 644-675.

issue frames are constructed perspectives that help people make sense of the world.³⁰ For example, in the context of abortion, the terms “pro-choice” and “pro-life” are issue frames that positively present both opposing policy stances (as opposed to pro-abortion and anti-abortion). Issue frames are also explicitly political phenomena that develop with political leaders and propagate through mass media.³¹ Scholars have studied the effects and implications of issue framing at length, with a small subset focusing on its ability to deliver partisan appeals. Broadly, they have found issue framing to be an extremely effective tool for influencing people’s perceptions.

Scholars have examined the conditions under which issue frames are more impactful on shaping perceptions through the use of experiments. They have shown that frames presenting issues through the lenses of health care and economics proved to be highly salient.³² Others have argued that frames that personalize issues and motivate audiences are more effective than those that do not.³³ Voters are also more responsive to frames that pose issues in individualistic frames instead of egalitarian frames.³⁴ One study even demonstrated how issue framing by influential actors was so powerful that it enabled policy action to address violence against women in Nepal.³⁵ In this study, Colombini and colleagues demonstrated that, while women’s groups and less influential institutions developed gender equity and development frames, they were largely ineffective in catalyzing any change.

³⁰ Thomas J. Leeper and Rune Slothuus, "Political parties, motivated reasoning, and public opinion formation," *Political Psychology* 35 (2014): 129-156.; Sophie Lecheler, Claes de Vreese, and Rune Slothuus, "Issue importance as a moderator of framing effects," *Communication research* 36, no. 3 (2009): 400-425.

³¹ Jacoby, "Issue Framing," 2000.

³² Nicolas M. Anspach and Gorana Draguljić, "Effective advocacy: the psychological mechanisms of environmental issue framing," *Environmental Politics* (2019): 1-24.; Manuela Colombini, Susannah H. Mayhew, Ben Hawkins, Meera Bista, Sunil Kumar Joshi, Berit Schei, and Charlotte Watts, "Agenda Setting and Framing of Gender-Based Violence in Nepal: How it Became a Health Issue," *Health Policy and Planning* 31, no. 4 (2016): 493-503.

³³ Robert Gifford and Louise A. Comeau, "Message Framing Influences Perceived Climate Change Competence, Engagement, and Behavioral Intentions," *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 4 (2011): 1301-1307.; Anspach and Draguljić, "Effective advocacy," 2019.

³⁴ David C. Barker, "Values, Frames, and Persuasion in Presidential Nomination Campaigns," *Political Behavior* 27, no. 4 (2005): 375-394.

³⁵ Colombini et al., "Agenda Setting," 2016.

However, the Prime Minister and the new Constitution both framed the issue as one of human rights and health – two frames that were powerful enough to shift the policy-making agenda.

Since issue frames by themselves have been effective tools in influencing audience responses, endowing frames with partisan attributes affects people's perceptions along a partisan spectrum. In other words, partisan issue frames have the power to make people's beliefs more divided along party lines. Based on two experiments embedded in nationally represented surveys, Slothuis and Vreese demonstrated that voters were more likely to follow frames promoted by the party with which they identify.³⁶ They also found that the effects of partisan issue frames were more pronounced for central issues in party conflicts and among more politically aware individuals. Essentially, they have empirically shown that partisan appeals through issue frames make people more partisan.

Narrowing to the context of presidential campaigns, two studies found that candidates not only owned certain issues, but also distinct issue frames that they used to deliver partisan appeals to voters.³⁷ Both studies demonstrated through qualitative analyses that, during the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, rhetoric varied by party and by the majority partisan identity of the target audience. In other words, the candidates from the Democratic and Republican parties used different sets of issue frames to discuss the same issues. Candidates from opposite parties certainly trespassed on discussing the other party's owned issues, but they did so by using issue frames that were unique to their party and appeals to their traditional values. As a result, both studies found that each party not only owned different issues, but also issue frames.

³⁶ Lecheler, Vreese, and Slothuis, "Issue importance," 2009.

³⁷ Brian Arbour, "Issue Frame Ownership: The Partisan Roots of Campaign Rhetoric," *Political Communication* 31, no. 4 (2014): 604-627.; C.J. Spiliotes and L. Vavreck, "Campaign advertising: Partisan convergence or divergence?" *The Journal of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2002): 249-261.

While scholars previously thought that issue frames allowed politicians to talk past one another, others have argued that they enabled them to better engage with one another, especially using partisan comparisons.³⁸ Partisan issue frames can help candidates acquire more support because, by contrasting the two candidates' positions, voters are better informed of what side of an issue each candidate falls. On the other hand, contrasting positions prevents the speaker from structuring the long-term development of the debate.³⁹ This is because doing so gives the opponent a chance to respond. Depending on their response, an opponent can win back the favor of some voters.

Issue linkages

Issue linkages operate in similar ways to issue frames but are even more complex. I define issue linkages in the context of presidential candidates' speeches to be the simultaneous discussion of two or more issues. To be clear, the issues must be discussed *in light of one another*. This is different than the mere proximity of discussing two issues; it requires some degree of interplay across them. As an example of an issue linkage, a candidate could consider health care spending as a component of economic policy, and then use their positions on economic policy to make a statement on their health policies. The linkage confers meaning from one issue to the other.

The theory explaining why issue frames influence voter opinions also extends to issue linkages, even suggesting that linkages could provoke stronger partisan responses. Like issue frames, linkages can exist with and without partisan attributes. However, they have the potential to convey even stronger partisan appeals than frames. Whereas partisan issue frames allow candidates to engage with opponents on single issues, partisan issue linkages permit them to engage across multiple issues. By pitting multiple

³⁸ Jennifer Jerit, "Issue framing and engagement: Rhetorical strategy in public policy debates," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 1 (2008): 1-24.

³⁹ Jerit, "Issue framing," 2008.; Andrew Karch and Aaron Rosenthal, "Framing, Engagement, and Policy Change: Lessons for the ACA," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 42, no. 2 (2017): 341-362.

positions against one another, candidates force voters to make simultaneous and contingent choices on all issues involved. Furthermore, if cross-candidate engagement increases the likelihood of voter activation, then partisan issue linkages that necessarily increase engagement could elicit stronger voter activation. This conjecture is merely an extension of existing theory and requires empirical verification through future studies.

Issue linkages also carry the potential to increase partisan rhetoric in political discourse over time. Candidates open themselves to more attacks since opponents can criticize them across many issues for a single position. This increases engagement, but also the possibility for debates to devolve into partisan rancor with little substance.

The consideration of issue linkage as a tool for delivering partisan appeals expands scholars' understanding of partisan rhetoric. In this study, provide quantitative and qualitative evidence that demonstrates how and why candidates used them in the context of abortion. I found that candidates linked abortion to the issues of health care, economic policy, defense, religion, various rights, gay marriage, and gun rights. The rights include women's rights and fetus's rights, which candidates often presented as opposing, mutually exclusive options. I discuss these linkages in light of candidates' changing strategies for discussing abortion in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: Aggregate Trends by Party and Election

In this chapter, I interpret aggregate trends describing campaign speeches by election year and party. I then synthesize the data across both measures to illustrate how Republican and Democratic candidates altered their strategies for discussing abortion. A major change in the abortion debate occurred between the 2008 and 2012 elections that carried into 2016. Democrats began more frequently discussing abortion, and those discussions were more partisan than before. The issues to which candidates from both parties linked abortion moved to focus more on health care and the economy with some variation based on issue ownership. These changes were facilitated by a shift towards discussing abortion through references to Planned Parenthood, a finding backed by word choice frequencies and the qualitative analyses in the following chapters.

Table 1: Frequency and Election Type of Relevant Documents

Election	Campaigns	Total Documents	Relevant Documents	General Election	Primary Election
2008	Obama	227	7 (3.1%)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)
	McCain	175	7 (4.0%)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)
2012	Obama	105	29 (27.6%)	29 (100%)	0 (0%)
	Romney	101	4 (4.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
2016	Clinton	89	15 (16.9%)	4 (27%)	11 (73%)
	Trump	75	2 (2.7%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Total	-	772	64 (8.3%)	42 (45%)	22 (34%)

*I considered the general election to have begun after each party in each cycle finished its final primary election. This generally happened one or two months preceding the official nominating conventions. I adopted this distinction because candidates would have shifted their strategies toward the general election once they confirmed their victory in the primaries.

Table 1 reflects that, between January 1, 2007 and December 31, 2016, candidates who won their party's nominations recorded 772 speeches and town hall meetings. After filtering for

keywords relating to abortion, 67 speeches remained for analysis. Democratic candidates accounted for 54 of the 67 speeches while Republican candidates made only 13. After coding each of these documents, I removed three speeches by Democrats from subsequent analysis because they did not discuss abortion despite containing relevant keywords. Obama and Clinton's campaigns in 2012 and 2016 produced most of the relevant documents (29 and 15, respectively) and the highest frequencies of abortion-related speech (27.6% and 16.9%). Obama drastically increased the number of times he discussed abortion from his 2008 campaign (3.1%) to his 2012 campaign (27.6%). Given Obama and McCain's similar frequencies during the 2008 campaign and the consistent rates for Republican candidates during subsequent years, the Democratic candidates' increase indicates a shift in strategy. Most candidates split how they engaged with abortion during the primary and general elections with the exceptions of Obama and Romney during the 2012 elections. Obama only discussed his abortion position in the general election while Romney only did so in the primaries. The American Presidency Project's database did not contain many of Trump's speeches during the primary campaign.

It is important to recognize the low number of references by Republican candidates. While the American Presidency Project's database contains fewer documents for more recent years, the number of documents between both parties is comparable for each election cycle. Apart from Donald Trump, whose primary campaign activity is not well represented, the total number of documents for each candidate were similarly distributed across primary and general elections. Given these similarities, the low number of speeches for Republican candidates does not compromise the validity of this study. In fact, the disparity suggests that Democratic candidates were more prone to discussing the issue and their related policy positions. While

previous findings suggest that abortion is a more salient issue for Republican voters, it is interesting to observe Democratic candidates making more appeals through the issue.⁴⁰

Because Democratic candidates were more likely to discuss abortion than Republicans in 2012 and 2016, breaking frequencies by election year skews the data towards Democratic trends. Nonetheless, Table 2 illustrates important trends that are vital to understanding partisan issue linkages and the abortion debate at large. Overall, the data suggests that candidates drastically altered the way they presented abortion between the 2008 and 2012 elections. The frequency of partisan rhetoric increased from just 21% in 2008 to 91% and 72% in 2012 and 2016. Common keywords from 2008 like abort-, pro-life, and Roe virtually disappeared from use in 2012 only to re-emerge at lower frequencies in 2016. Instead, candidates discussed abortion overwhelmingly in terms of Planned Parenthood in both years (65% and 62%). Between 2008 and 2012, issue linkages went from being rather evenly spread to being concentrated in health care and economic policy in 2012. By 2016, issue linkages shifted again, remaining high among economic appeals but increasing among women's rights, LGBT rights, and gun violence. When considered with the trends by party, these changes over time clarify how and why candidates altered the way they discussed abortion.

⁴⁰ Killian and Wilcox, "Do Abortion Attitudes Lead to Party Switching?" 2008.

Table 2: Partisanship, Word Choice, and Issue Linkages by Election Year

Row Labels		2008 (%)		2012 (%)		2016 (%)		Total
Partisan- ship	Partisan	3	21%	30	91%	13	72%	46
	Non-Partisan	6	43%	2	6%	5	28%	13
	Bipartisan	5	36%	1	3%	0	0%	6
	Total	14	100%	33	100%	18	100%	65
Word Choice	Abort-	41	53%	9	9%	24	21%	74
	Planned Parenthood	0	0%	64	65%	72	62%	136
	Contraception	4	5%	23	23%	2	2%	29
	Pro-Life	15	19%	1	1%	10	9%	26
	Pro-Choice	5	6%	0	0%	0	0%	5
	Roe	11	14%	1	1%	5	4%	17
	Reproductive	1	1%	0	0%	1	1%	2
	Fetus	0	0%	0	0%	2	2%	2
Total	77	100%	98	100%	116	100%	291	
Issue Linkages	Health care	4	19%	31	38%	9	24%	44
	Economy	1	5%	24	30%	8	22%	33
	Religion	2	10%	3	4%	1	3%	6
	Defense	4	19%	0	0%	0	0%	4
	Women's Rights	2	10%	9	11%	8	22%	19
	Fetus Rights	6	29%	1	1%	0	0%	7
	LGBT Rights	2	10%	13	16%	7	19%	22
	Gun Control	0	0%	0	0%	4	11%	4
Total	21	100%	81	100%	37	100%	139	

In addition to the basic frequency of abortion discussions, Table 3 demonstrates fundamental differences in how each party presented their positions. Democratic candidates made partisan appeals at a significantly higher rate than Republicans. 81% of Democratic discussions of abortion and related keywords contained partisan appeals in contrast to only 31% of Republican discussions. The frequencies of both party's partisan appeals are notably inflated from the single digit frequencies found in other studies.⁴¹ This is due to the especially partisan nature of abortion and this study's deeper analysis of language and context surrounding keyword mentions.

⁴¹ Jarvis, "Partisan patterns," 2004.; Rhodes and Albert, "The transformation of partisan rhetoric," 2017.

Table 3: Partisan Appeals, Word Choice, and Issue Linkages by Party

	Row Labels	Democrats		Republicans		Total
Partisanship	Partisan	42	81%	4	31%	46
	Non-Partisan	6	12%	7	54%	13
	Bipartisan	4	8%	2	15%	6
	Total	52	100%	13	100%	65
Word Choice	Abort-	50	22%	24	38%	74
	Planned Parenthood	128	56%	8	13%	136
	Contraception	29	13%	0	0%	29
	Pro-Life	2	1%	24	38%	26
	Pro-Choice	3	1%	2	3%	5
	Roe	11	5%	6	9%	17
	Reproductive	2	1%	0	0%	2
	Fetus	2	1%	0	0%	2
	Total	227	100%	64	100%	291
Issue Linkages	Health care	41	35%	3	14%	44
	Economy	30	25%	3	14%	33
	Religion	3	3%	3	14%	6
	Defense	0	0%	4	19%	4
	Women's Rights	19	16%	0	0%	19
	Fetus Rights	1	1%	6	29%	7
	Gay Marriage	20	17%	2	10%	22
	Gun Control	4	3%	0	0%	4
	Total	118	100%	21	100%	139

The differences in candidates' choice of keywords also reflected their campaign strategies for discussing the issue. Republican candidates were 16% more likely than Democratic candidates to speak directly about the topic using words with abort- as a stem. Given that Republicans must appeal to the religious conservatives within their own party, it helps them draw their attention by speaking about their anti-abortion stances directly. The opposite is true for Democratic candidates, who can better appeal to conservative-leaning religious voters by speaking indirectly about their abortion views. Democratic candidates used references to "contraception" (13%) and "Planned Parenthood" (56%) to reframe their views on the right to

abortion. Both terms de-emphasize the actual concept of abortion from the center of debate, allowing candidates to subvert negative perceptions of their position while still assuring pro-choice voters of their support. Republican candidates still discussed abortion through Planned Parenthood (13%), but they more often did so through other terms.

Republican candidates were more likely than Democrats to discuss abortion using the word pro-life (36%). Republicans' tendency to use the word pro-life comes as no surprise since it positively frames their anti-abortion position. Positive framing has a stronger appeal to voter psychology and draws stronger support.⁴² There is also a substantial body of literature arguing that the pro-life frame is a more powerful appeal than the pro-choice frame.⁴³ One key difference is that many consider moral obligation to protect life to be greater than for protecting choice.⁴⁴ Republicans desire to draw on this binary framing strategy comes as no surprise since it presents their positions in a positive, winning light.

Lastly Table 3 shows that the issues with which candidates linked abortion varied by party, with both parties linking it to issues that they own. Each discussion of abortion could be linked to multiple issues, resulting in notably more linkages than total documents. Democratic candidates were more likely to use linkages to health care (35%) than Republican candidates (14%). Both parties also presented their abortion positions through linkages to different sets of rights. While Democrats linked to women's rights (16%), gay marriage (17%), and gun control (3%), Republican candidates never mentioned abortion alongside gun control or women's rights

⁴² Irwin P. Levin, Sandra L. Schneider, and Gary J. Gaeth, "All frames are not created equal: A typology and critical analysis of framing effects," *Organizational behavior and human decision processes* 76, no. 2 (1998): 149-188.

⁴³ Alexa J. Trumpy, "'I Hate it, but it Still Sounds Good': Collective Identity and the Evaluation of Oppositional Frame Resonance," *Social Movement Studies* 15, no. 2 (2016): 164-179.; Alexa J. Trumpy, "Woman Vs. Fetus: Frame Transformation and Intramovement Dynamics in the Pro-Life Movement," *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 2 (2014): 163-184.; Marsha L Vanderford, "Vilification and Social Movements: A Case Study of Pro-life and Pro-choice Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75, no. 2 (1989): 166-182.; Kathy Rudy, *Beyond Pro-Life and Pro-Choice: Moral Diversity in the Abortion Debate*, Beacon Press, 1997.

⁴⁴ Trumpy, "I Hate it, but it still sounds good," 2016.

and less frequently made linkages to LGBT rights (10%). Instead, Republicans included linkages to the rights of the fetus (29%), defense (19%) and religion (14%) more often than Democrats.

These differences across issue linkages make sense since each party favored presenting their abortion positions alongside other issues on which they had more authority. Democrats have owned the issues of health care and civil rights while Republicans own defense and have had strong alignment among the religious right.⁴⁵ The only discord between the data and theory occurred for linkages to economic policy. While Republicans have owned economic issues like taxes and spending, Democratic candidates more often used those linkages (25%) than Republicans (14%). However, the qualitative review in Chapters 5 and 6 reconciles this concern. There, I demonstrate that Democrats used abortion policies to attack Republican economic policies since Republicans so strongly opposed allocating federal funds to Planned Parenthood. This finding contributes to scholars' understanding of issue ownership and demonstrates that the concept of issue linkages strongly draws on existing ideas.

Synthesizing the preceding results together gives a glimpse into the overarching strategies of each party for discussing abortion. These findings suggest that, beginning in 2012, Democrats developed a new strategy for discussing abortion in a way that was more partisan and relatable to health care, economic policy, and women's rights.⁴⁶ Their higher frequency for discussing abortion suggests that their new strategy effectively drew support from a wide voter base, even in the general elections. Republicans also adjusted their strategy that year. All of their linkages to fetus's rights and defense, their two most popular issue linkages, occurred in 2008. In the 2012 and 2016 elections, they discussed abortion through many of the same issue linkages as

⁴⁵ Petrocik, "Issue Ownership and Presidential Campaigning, 1952-2000," 2003.; See discussion in Chapter 2 on issue ownership for more details.

⁴⁶ See discussion of Planned Parenthood in Chapter 5 for more details.

Democrats (namely health care and the economy) while retaining more linkages to religion.

Based on the data, the transition towards discussing abortion through references to Planned Parenthood appeared to have swayed the debate. The qualitative review in the following chapters reinforces this analysis while highlighting the development of various issue linkages.

Chapter 4: 2008 Election

The language that politicians used to discuss abortion underwent substantial changes over the 2008, 2012, and 2016 election cycles. Chapters 4 to 6 present a qualitative analysis of these changes and how they developed. As candidates employed stronger issue linkages across these three elections, abortion transformed from a stand-alone issue to one entrenched in a partisan policy package. Candidates' abortion positions altered as they adopted newer and more partisan issue linkages, with a drastic shift in the 2012 elections once Planned Parenthood became a popular symbol for the pro-choice movement. In arguing that issue linkages took on greater partisan significance during the 2012 and 2016 elections, I demonstrate that partisan appeals frequently occur through discussions of opponents' policy positions – an element that was not previously captured in studies of campaign speeches. Among Democrats, abortion was consistently linked to health care and women's rights. In later elections, these linkages became more partisan and linkages to economic policies became more common. Among Republicans, linkages to the rights of the fetus gave way to health care, economic policy, and religion. Like Democratic candidates, Republicans also increased the partisan appeals embedded in their issue linkages between the 2008 and 2012 cycles.

Analyzing the speeches chronologically revealed two events that were responsible for driving these changes: the rise of Planned Parenthood as a symbol for abortion and the passage of the ACA. Planned Parenthood accounted for 48% of all keyword mentions over the 3 election cycles but was never mentioned in the 2008 election.⁴⁷ Taken with the decline in using words stemmed from abort- among Democrats, the data demonstrates that candidates shifted to discuss abortion through implicit references in the later elections. Economic linkages became more

⁴⁷ See Table 2 in Chapter 3.

prominent once candidates could discuss abortion in terms of providing federal funding to Planned Parenthood. Likewise, health care linkages became more partisan after 2012 since candidates often brought up their opponent when discussing the future of health care reform.

During the 2008 election, both Obama and McCain discussed abortion as a stand-alone issue. Both candidates used vocabulary that explicitly discussed abortion, making no effort to obscure their positions on the controversial issue. When they employed linkages to other issues, their linkages were weak and rarely carried partisan appeals of their own. The only exceptions were their partisan attacks of one another following the Saddleback Church Civic Forum that August. Their linkages nonetheless differed, with McCain primarily linking abortion to fetus's rights and Obama linking it to health care, women's rights, and religion.

The candidates presented abortion in alternative ways to win voter support. Obama adopted centrist language and positions when appealing to religious voters in the primaries and conservative voters in the general election. Even outside those circumstances, he appealed to bipartisan solutions to abortion – a counterintuitive trend since abortion had a long and established history of being a partisan issue.⁴⁸ While McCain did not adjust his strategy when appealing to religious voters, he obscured some of his positions during the general election to avoid losing voters. He also presented his pro-life stance on protecting the life of the fetus as a bipartisan solution even when attacking Obama in the general election.

McCain

McCain presented himself as a steadfast pro-life conservative and rarely deviated from discussing abortion directly or through his voting record. While he linked abortion to defense

⁴⁸ See discussion in Chapter 2

(36%) and fetus's rights (45%), these links did not stop him from discussing abortion's moral and legal limits.⁴⁹ He also synthesized these two linkages to complement one another under the umbrella of pro-life policies. He used them to establish his consistency and credibility among voters instead of differences between himself and other candidates. As a result, his speech was free of partisan rhetoric until the Saddleback Church Forum.

McCain's policy stance on abortion was to prohibit late-term abortions, require protections for the lives of fetuses, and return the decision to legalize abortion to the states. Not only did his speeches reflect these positions, but also that year's Republican platform.⁵⁰ He emphasized these points by discussing his voting record in the Senate and describing his frustration with pro-choice judges and the *Roe v. Wade* decision. His word choice substantiates the finding that he spoke openly about his cohesive set of pro-life values and his consistent voting record to limit abortions. He most commonly used the keywords abort- (38%) and pro-life (41%), suggesting that he sought to make his position clear to voters while presenting his views in a positive light.⁵¹

McCain linked abortion to the human rights of fetuses and defense to give himself more credible and consistent pro-life agenda. It is important to note that neither of these linkages took on partisan characteristics and they did not prevent him from arguing his abortion policy in depth. He argued that, because he had been a prisoner of war without human rights, he had "a personal obligation to advocate human rights wherever they are denied: in Bosnia or Burma, in Cuba or the Middle East; and in our own country when we fail to respect the inherent dignity of

⁴⁹ See Appendix Table 1.

⁵⁰ The American Presidency Project, "Republican Party Platform 2008," accessed March 20, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/books/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/national-political-party-platforms-of-parties-receiving-electoral-votes-1840-2016/78545.pdf>.

⁵¹ See Appendix Table 1.

all human life, born or unborn.”⁵² In doing so, he not only demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency for his beliefs, but also consistency over time to reassure voters that his presidency would reflect his past actions. The tie to war reminded voters of his honorable experience in a subject where they already perceive Republicans to be more trustworthy. Using this linkage to defense and human rights, McCain appealed to voters by constructing an image of authority.

By omitting any discussion of his policies’ effects on mothers, McCain presented a clean pro-life vision without having to reconcile his opposition to contraception coverage and federal welfare programs. In the first month after announcing his candidacy, McCain jointly discussed the needs to respect the lives of unborn babies and support women to complete their pregnancies.⁵³ He stated that “we have to help them with compassion and [...] courage. And we also have to do whatever we can to let them know that, if they don't want the child, if they'll bring them into life, that we'll do everything we can to help with adoption.”⁵⁴ While he promised to assist women through adoption services, his desire to shift the funding and control of welfare programs back to states would lead to varying standards for adoption and supportive welfare programs across the country. Furthermore, his opposition to contraception contrasted with his desire to reduce the prevalence of abortions since contraception reduced unplanned pregnancies. Lastly, he struggled to conceal the coercive nature of his policies, which often *encouraged* women to complete their pregnancies by reducing their access to abortions. In order to sidestep these complications, McCain spoke exclusively about the nation’s obligation to protect a fetus’s right to life.

⁵² John McCain, "Address to the Values Voter Summit " (speech, Washington DC, October 19, 2007), The American Presidency Project.

⁵³ John McCain, "Interview with Tim Russert on NBC News " (interview, May 13, 2007), The American Presidency Project.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Interestingly, McCain obscured his views on repealing *Roe v. Wade* once he gained the Republican nomination for the general election. During the primaries, he strongly favored appointing judges to repeal the decision by criticizing the “activist judges” who made the decision and hoping that “women would bring those children into birth and into life in this world, and that I could do whatever I could to assist them.”⁵⁵ After winning the Republican nomination, he gave a cryptic answer to CNN’s Wolf Blitzer when asked about his desire to overturn the ruling: “I don't agree with the decision. It's a decision that's there. I will appoint judges to the United States Supreme Court that do enforce strictly the Constitution of the United States and do not legislate from the bench.”⁵⁶ His response could either be interpreted as respecting the status quo or, if the right to abortion fell outside the purview of the Constitution, as wanting to reinterpret abortion’s legality. Taking a softer and vaguer stance on abortion during the general election was logical since he was appealing to a less conservative audience.

Obama

While Obama espoused opposing views to McCain on abortion, he too presented a detailed policy stance on the issue instead of through strong partisan issue linkages. Obama firmly believed that women had the right to choose whether to bring their babies to term, but he used centrist language to hedge his rhetoric with religious Democrats and advocated for bipartisan solutions to reduce unwanted pregnancies. His rhetoric mirrored that of Bill Clinton’s belief that abortion should be “safe, legal, and rare,” with an emphasis on making abortions

⁵⁵ Ibid.; John McCain, "Address to the Values Voter Summit " (speech, Washington DC, October 19, 2007), The American Presidency Project.

⁵⁶ John McCain, "Interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC News " (interview, Washington DC, July 27, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

“rare.”⁵⁷ Like McCain, Obama also spoke about abortion directly, with the stem abort- comprising 64% of his keyword references.⁵⁸ He weakly linked abortion to health care, women’s rights, and religion, and less than half of his discussions (29%) carried any partisan significance.

In contrast to McCain, who magnified his voting record to make weak bipartisan appeals, Obama used his centrist language to emphasize the future possibility of compromise. He appealed to pro-choice and pro-life voters by affirming the importance of both sides’ policy preferences. He also postured solutions to reduce the number of abortions instead of clarifying where he thought its moral and legal limits lay. At the Compassion Forum, a televised live audience interview focused on religion in politics, Obama used centrist language to qualify his pro-choice position for a pro-life audience. When describing how both parties could prevent abortions, he stated that it was necessary to:

Take a comprehensive approach where we focus on abstinence, where we are teaching the sacredness of sexuality to our children. But we also recognize the importance of good medical care for women, that we're also recognizing the importance of age-appropriate education to reduce risks. I do believe that contraception has to be part of that education process.⁵⁹

In the language preceding a clear presentation of his support for contraceptive education, Obama used a number of strategies to preempt opposition from the religious audience. By first recognizing the importance of abstinence education, he elicited support from religious voters who opposed the education of other forms of birth control in schools. He subsequently posed alternative forms of birth control as “good medical care for women” to establish a common policy goal. Furthermore, his use of qualifying and vague terms like “age-appropriate education” and “reduce risks” gave the audience freedom to interpret the specifics of his position as they

⁵⁷ On the Issues, “Bill Clinton on the Issues,” accessed on Mar 26, 2019, http://www.ontheissues.org/Celeb/Bill_Clinton_Abortion.html.

⁵⁸ See Appendix Table 1.

⁵⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks at the Compassion Forum,” (speech, April 13, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

saw fit. These steps allowed him to present a clear policy solution to prevent abortions while minimizing the audience's opposition. Obama's centrist language constituted a strong bipartisan appeal and showed the audience that he was committed to operating above party politics. However, the tradeoff to his strategy was that he could not use left leaning appeals to win over democratic voters in the primaries.

Until August of the general election, Obama only made weak, non-partisan issue linkages to health care and religion when discussing abortion. Furthermore, none of these linkages replaced his presentation of the substance of his policy views. He used linkages to religion to reassert the place of faith in the decision to make abortions. He clarified his belief that it was "a woman's responsibility and choice to make in consultation with her doctor and her pastor and her family."⁶⁰ In doing so, he mitigated women's role in making the decision while highlighting the influence of medical and religious authorities. This reassured religious voters that decisions to have abortions were carefully considered along moral lines. By establishing the choice to have abortions as a rationale one, he could explore ways for reducing their prevalence.

Obama also linked abortion to health care only in passing. He frequently mentioned the need to provide sufficient health services to women considering abortions so they could better make their decisions. In the context of his overall issue stances, these health services most likely referred to access to birth control or family planning services. Presenting them as health services preempted opposition from conservative leaning voters.

⁶⁰ Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Compassion Forum," (speech, April 13, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

Saddleback Church Civic Forum

Early in the general election, both candidates answered questions about their policies at a civil forum at the Saddleback Church. This forum was significant not only due to the contrasting receptions of both candidates' responses, but also because it escalated the partisan rhetoric on abortion. McCain used Obama's responses to criticize his leadership abilities while Obama adopted strong partisan linkages to women's rights to attack McCain's policies. This interview marked the first time that both candidates had met during the campaign and reflected a unique format. While candidates discussed their positions on a broad number of issues, the moderator, pastor Rick Warren, kept a special focus on policies that were especially relevant to religious voters. Both candidates answered the same questions on the same day without hearing the other's responses.

Obama interviewed first, and when asked "at what point does a baby get human rights," he responded: "whether you are looking at it from a theological perspective or a scientific perspective, answering that question with specificity is above my pay grade."⁶¹ Realizing that Warren and the audience were not satisfied with that answer, he rambled to buy time before reverting back to his pro-choice policy view. He conceded that, while he could not argue against those who believed that life began at conception, there were "ways that we can work together to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies [...] And as an example of that, one of the things that I've talked about is how do we provide the resources that allow women to make the choice to keep a child. You know, have we given them the health care that they need? Have we given them the support services that they need?"⁶² Using a bipartisan appeal allowed him to save face after

⁶¹ Barack Obama, "Remarks at the Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency," (speech, Lake Forest, CA, August 16, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

⁶² Ibid.

his inadequate response to Warren's initial question. His brief mention of health care and support services constituted a weak linkage to external issues that contained no elements of partisan language. These mentions also characterized his health care linkages across all campaign events. This passing mention of health care differed from his linkages in 2012, which carried loaded partisan rhetoric.

When McCain later responded to the same question, he immediately responded that babies received human rights "at the moment of conception."⁶³ The audience applauded his direct and unhesitating response. In fact, Warren was so easily convinced of McCain's position that he did not even allow him to finish speaking on the issue. McCain sought to dive deeper in a discussion of judges and *Roe v. Wade*, but Warren stopped him short before transitioning promptly to his views on gay marriage. Both candidates' responses garnered polar opposite responses from the religious audience present at the Church.

Recognizing his success at the forum, McCain capitalized on the momentum by delivering a scathing speech that criticized Obama's position and character based on his response. McCain called Obama's "above my pay grade" response "the line of the week, and maybe even of the campaign."⁶⁴ He argued that, while Obama's speeches were impressive, "when it's time for straight answers, clear conviction, and decisive action, suddenly all of these responsibilities are—well, as he puts it, 'above my pay grade.' As mottos of leadership go, it doesn't exactly have the ring of 'the buck stops here.'"⁶⁵ By contrasting Obama with Lindon B. Johnson's iconic slogan, McCain attacked Obama for his unwillingness to take strong positions

⁶³ John McCain, "Remarks at the Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency," (speech, Lake Forest, CA, August 16, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

⁶⁴ John McCain, "Senator McCain's Weekly Address," (speech, Lake Forest, CA, August 23, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

and for being a candidate of no substance. Ironically, McCain attacked Obama for not being genuine about his openness to bipartisan solutions while transforming abortion into a vehicle for partisan rancor.

Obama responded by using partisan appeals to defend himself from McCain's attacks. In two campaign speeches over the next month, he linked abortion to women's rights in partisan ways to draw strong contrasts between himself and McCain. The following quote characterizes the language in both speeches:

Now, my opponent actually opposed legislation to help women get equal pay. [...] That isn't change. Change is finally closing that pay gap. [...] Change isn't a President who thinks *Roe vs. Wade* is a flawed decision and whose party platform outlaws abortion, even in cases of rape and incest. Change is a President who will stand up for choice.⁶⁶

He argued that McCain neither supported women's rights to equal pay nor their ability to make health choices about their bodies.⁶⁷ By attacking McCain across both of these fronts, he established himself as the only candidate supporting a comprehensive protection of women's rights - a direct appeal to women voters in the general election. In addition to its attacks of McCain, the linkage also conveyed a strong partisan appeal because supporting women's rights was partisan position. Policies to ensure equal pay were a contested partisan issue since the Republican platform did not even address these issues.⁶⁸

Despite the partisan shift following the Saddleback Church responses, the 2008 election was the only one of the three studied in which abortion was discussed primarily through non-partisan and bipartisan rhetoric. Both campaigns used weak linkages to other issues. Instead,

⁶⁶ Barack Obama, "Remarks in Daytona Beach, Florida," (speech, Daytona Beach, FL, September 20, 2008), The American Presidency Project.

⁶⁷ The American Presidency Project, "Republican Party Platform 2008."

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

candidates discussed abortion in its own right. The aftermath of the Saddleback Church comments was short lived, and neither candidate discussed abortion late into the general election.

Chapter 5: 2012 Election

During the 2012 election, abortion transformed from a stand-alone issue to one debated through partisan linkages to other issue positions. The rise of Planned Parenthood as a symbol for abortion and the passage of the ACA facilitated this transformation. Candidates mentioned Planned Parenthood 136 times between the 2012 and 2016 elections whereas they never did in 2008. In fact, the organization's name comprised 70% of Obama's keyword mentions and 43% of Romney's. Abortion's relation to Planned Parenthood allowed candidates from both parties to make additional and more partisan linkages to economic planning and health care. Obama also made stronger links to women's rights while Romney appealed to religious voters. These new ways of implicitly referencing abortion allowed Obama to drastically increase his frequency for discussing the issue, even late into the general election.

Planned Parenthood came under heightened scrutiny in early 2011 when the decision over its federal funding nearly triggered a government shutdown. In February 2011, a Republican dominated House voted to cut off all \$317 million federal dollars going to the organization.⁶⁹ This measure came as part of a bill to reduce federal spending by \$38 billion to balance the Congressional budget. That Planned Parenthood received any funding at all was already a contentious issue along party lines. According to the Hyde Amendment, passed in September 1976, federal funds could not directly finance abortions. Despite being the largest provider of abortions nationwide, Congress still allocated funds to Planned Parenthood to subsidize other forms of women's health and family planning services. Pro-life Republicans voiced their opposition to the funds by arguing that subsidizing Planned Parenthood's other

⁶⁹ Erik Eckholm, "Planned Parenthood Financing is Caught in Budget Feud," *The New York Times*, last modified February 17, 2018, accessed on March 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/18/us/politics/18parenthood.html>.

services freed resources for providing abortions. Democratic and Republican senators refused to compromise over the organization's funding until the final hour before the government shutdown would have begun. In a last-minute concession, Republican senators agreed to maintain Planned Parenthood funding in return for alternative budget cuts.⁷⁰ While Planned Parenthood ultimately retained its funding, it transformed into an even more polarizing symbol for abortion after being subjected to the spotlight.

Romney

As an established businessman, Romney benefitted from this development since he could discuss abortion in terms of economic policy. He capitalized on the conservatives' distaste for Planned Parenthood by promising to end the organization's federal funding during his presidency. Because Romney was a conservative governor in the liberal state of Massachusetts, he had historically been quiet when opposing abortion. As a result, he heavily relied on partisan issue linkages to establish credibility among voters. Since the Republican party had more public trust on fiscal issues like taxes, linking abortion to economic policy lent Romney more credibility when discussing his views. His background as a businessman complemented this linkage much like McCain's military background allowed him to extend the human rights' argument to fetuses.

Romney also leveraged Planned Parenthood's linkage to economic policy to make additional partisan linkages to health care. In the following excerpt, Romney used his fiscal policy to align voter sentiment against abortion and the ACA in his favor:

⁷⁰ Julie Rovner, "Planned Parenthood: A Thorn in Abortion Foes' Sides," *NPR*, last modified April 13, 2011, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/13/135354952/planned-parenthood-makes-abortion-foes-see-red>.

Upon taking office, I will immediately cut discretionary spending and submit a budget that returns spending to pre-Obama levels. [...] First, [I will] eliminate and cut programs. That will start with the easiest cut of all: I will repeal Obamacare. This alone will save us \$95 billion a year. It's bad law, bad policy, and when I'm president, the bad news of Obamacare will be over. [...] We also spend \$300 million a year on groups like Planned Parenthood, which provide abortions or abortion-related services. It's long past time for that to be over.⁷¹

Romney listed funding for the ACA and Planned Parenthood as two Obama policies that he would immediately cut to remedy the country's deficit. Doing so packaged his positions on both issues and presented them as part of his fiscal policy. He identified Planned Parenthood as an abortion provider, making its symbolic status clear to Republican audiences. Romney also used the term Obamacare to refer to the ACA and call upon knee-jerk partisan support from his audience. His linkage to Obamacare not only reinforces his conservative image among voters, but also impels them to attribute partisan anger towards Planned Parenthood (and vice versa).

In addition to health care and economic policies, Romney made more religious linkages to abortion than McCain. However, like McCain's links to fetus rights, the primary function of Romney's links to religion was to lend him credibility among religious voters instead of developing a policy package. Since many Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical voters were wary of his Mormon background, Romney emphasized his pro-life views with the needs to incorporate religious values into government. In the following excerpt, Romney lists acclaims to the pro-life actions he took as Governor:

I vetoed a bill that would have allowed young girls to gain access to abortion-inducing drugs. I fought for abstinence education in our public schools. And I defended the Catholic Church's right to serve their community in ways that were consistent with their

⁷¹ Mitt Romney, "Remarks at the American Prosperity Conference," (speech, Washington DC, November 4, 2011), The American Presidency Project.; Romney made nearly identical remarks again on another day. See Mitt Romney, "Remarks to the Detroit Economic Club," (speech, Detroit, MI, February 24, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

conscience through adoption programs that placed children in a home with a mom and a dad. I was a conservative governor. I fought against long odds in a deep blue state.⁷²

An argument can be made that allowing religious institutions to take on some government responsibilities is a conservative policy; however, the linkage is weakly partisan at best. Though Romney made an appeal to religious freedom in a discussion of abortion, sex education, and adoption, this was just a way to demonstrate that he “fought long odds in a deep blue state.” The fact that he restated that he “was a conservative governor” underscores his desire to convince religious voters that he would represent their interests.

Like all the other candidates barring Trump, Romney adapted the issues to which he linked abortion to complement his strengths. Instead of discussing his abortion positions directly, he used Planned Parenthood to implicitly discuss the issue. This further allowed him to use economic and health care linkages that drew on partisan appeals.

Obama

As the incumbent, Obama’s policy position in 2012 was to maintain the status quo from his previous four years. His rhetoric for discussing abortion had shifted far left of his centrist views and bipartisan appeals during the previous campaign. He attacked Romney’s policy to “defund Planned Parenthood,” made the protection of those funds his central abortion policy, and only discussed abortion in terms of Planned Parenthood and contraception. Furthermore, Obama’s use of Planned Parenthood as a symbol differed from Romney’s since he emphasized its health services instead of abortion services. Lastly, compared to his 2008 campaign, he used

⁷² Mitt Romney, "Remarks to the Conservative Political Action Conference," (speech, February 10, 2011), The American Presidency Project.

much stronger partisan issue linkages to health care, economic policy, and women's rights to situate abortion in a Democratic policy package.

Obama linked abortion to economic policies exclusively when attacking Romney for his proposals, but he frequently did so in his speeches. He criticized Romney's five-point economic plan and tax cuts favoring the wealthy on their substance and funding. On their substance, he said both plans were fundamentally designed around a one-point plan to "make sure that folks at the top play by a different set of rules."⁷³ And when discussing how Romney planned to finance these policies, he said Romney "was going to pay for it by cutting Planned Parenthood and Big Bird."⁷⁴ Obama's criticism of the plan's substance for helping the wealthy reframes Republicans' capitalist ideal of rewarding success. Democrats often view the same policies as penalizing the poor and use rhetoric that accuses Republicans of helping the wealthy as a common partisan appeal. Obama links this rhetoric to Romney's funding cuts to Planned Parenthood and PBS to ridicule him for pushing a dysfunctional plan.

While Obama felt strongly about finding a bipartisan solution to reducing abortions in 2008, he abandoned this strategy in the 2012 election. Because he enjoyed the incumbent advantage, he could recognize his ability to achieve bipartisan compromises while taking stronger stances on the most partisan policies. He still made frequent appeals to bipartisanship but would identify Planned Parenthood funding as an area where he was unwilling to compromise. He repeated nearly identical forms of the following speech sixteen times in the final week leading up to the election:

When we cut taxes for middle class families and small businesses, we got Republican help. When we came together to repeal "don't ask, don't tell," we had some courageous Republican Senators who supported it. [...] But you've also got to have principles. [...]

⁷³ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally," (speech, Mount Vernon, Iowa, October 17, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

And if the price of peace in Washington is cutting deals to kick students off of financial aid or get rid of funding for Planned Parenthood or let insurance companies go back to discriminating against people with preexisting conditions or eliminate millions of people on Medicaid who rely on it for their health care—the poor, the disabled, the elderly—that's not a deal I'm willing to take.⁷⁵

Of the bipartisan compromises that Obama presented, tax cuts are a Republican owned issue and LGBT rights are a Democratic owned issue. Obama selected them to demonstrate that bipartisan solutions are possible for partisan issues that both sides own. This sentiment aligned with his message in the 2008 campaign. However, Obama then identified a series of partisan issues without bipartisan solutions, one of which was abortion. By excluding them from the possibility of compromise, he links his positions on abortion with student aid, Medicaid, and insurance discrimination together in a partisan package. Since the ACA encompassed the two latter policies, Obama created a strong partisan linkage between health care and abortion.

In contrast to Romney, Obama defended Planned Parenthood by emphasizing its provision of other health services to women instead of abortions. He methodically escalated the role of abortion in health care until they were of equal importance to establish a strong partisan linkage. In the following excerpt, Obama demonstrates this linkage while attacking Romney's policy stance:

Governor Romney didn't want to talk much last night about how he wants to end funding for Planned Parenthood, how he supports legislation that would turn certain decisions about a woman's health care over to their employers. [...] We passed Obamacare—yes, I like the term—we passed it—[Laughter]—because I do care, and I want to put these choices in your hands where they belong.⁷⁶

Obama knew that his audience was aware of the significance for Planned Parenthood as a symbol for abortion. He also knew that, while Romney's true opposition to Planned Parenthood

⁷⁵ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally," (speech, Concord, New Hampshire, November 4, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

⁷⁶ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally," (speech, Mount Vernon, Iowa, October 17, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

was because it provided abortions, he could shift his audiences' focus to the non-controversial health benefits that it provided. He facilitated this shift by pairing Planned Parenthood with "legislation that would turn certain decisions about a woman's health care over to their employers." In doing so, Obama included Planned Parenthood's services under a broad definition of health care.

Having established a strong issue linkage, he attributed it partisan characteristics by attacking Romney's proposal and contrasting it with Obamacare. Obama antagonized Romney for producing a reprehensible outcome: sacrificing choice in personal decisions to employers. He then contrasted Romney's legislation that limited one's freedom of choice with the ACA, which he says "put [health] choices in your hands where they belong."⁷⁷ His message on health choices mirrors the language of the pro-choice position as well. Obama even used the name "Obamacare" when describing the ACA to introduce an additional partisan appeal to his attack. He rarely used that name, given that he historically disliked it for its negative connotation amidst Republicans. This preference is also reflected by his own speeches, which reference the ACA by its full name 1781 times compared to only 52 mentions of Obamacare. The attack and explicit comparison to "Obamacare" embedded a strong partisan appeal in the issue linkage.

Notably, Obama manipulated his depiction of Romney in this account to create a better narrative that linked abortion to health care. The legislation to which Obama was referring was already a component of the ACA that mandated employers to include birth control in their health insurance plans.⁷⁸ This was a controversial component of the ACA to which Romney had voiced

⁷⁷ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally," (speech, Mount Vernon, Iowa, October 17, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

⁷⁸ This same provision was later struck down in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* in 2014 after much conservative backlash.

his opposition.⁷⁹ Therefore, Romney did not support new legislation to reduce choice, but instead opposed Obama's legislation that recently increased it. The subtle manipulation of Romney's true actions allowed Obama to present the contraception law and Planned Parenthood forms of health care equal.

Obama further situated abortion as a component of women's rights by tying sociopolitical equality to health equality. Since only the Democratic party officially supports a push for women's rights, issues of women's equality are necessarily partisan issues. Since Obama emphasized Planned Parenthood's health benefits instead of abortion services, he indirectly attributed abortion with partisan characteristics by linking it to equal pay in the following quote:

“Look, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, this was the first bill I signed into law. [...] This is not just a women's issue, this is a family issue, this is an economic issue. I also believe women should make their own health care decisions. [...] Governor Romney said he'd end funding for Planned Parenthood, despite all the work it does to provide women with mammograms and breast cancer screenings.”⁸⁰

By emphasizing that the Fair Pay Act, which granted women a more flexible timeline to sue employers for pay discrimination, was the first bill he signed into law, Obama established his credibility as an advocate for women's economic rights. The Act had also been divided along partisan lines, with House Republicans blocking the first attempt to pass the bill in April 2008.⁸¹ By subsequently defining women's rights more broadly as a family and economic issue, he poised himself to refocus on the right of women to “make their own health care decisions.” This language simultaneously employs linkages to health care and women's rights to characterize

⁷⁹ Mitt Romney, "Remarks to the Conservative Political Action Conference," (speech, February 10, 2011), The American Presidency Project.

⁸⁰ Barack Obama, "Remarks at a Campaign Rally," (speech, Manchester, New Hampshire, October 18, 2012), The American Presidency Project.

⁸¹ Carl Hulse, "Republican Senators Block Pay Discrimination Measure," *The New York Times*, Last modified April 24, 2008, Accessed March 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/24/washington/24cong.html?_r=2&sq=&oref=slogin.

abortion as their intersection. As a result, Obama skillfully used issue linkages to give a multidimensional partisan color to abortion.

In this election cycle, candidates from both parties debated and attacked one another through the issue of abortion. They did so by discussing it with strong partisan linkages to other issue positions. This election embedded abortion within a partisan policy package, a feature that candidates in the 2016 election took for granted.

Chapter 6: 2016 Election

By the 2016 election, abortion transformed from an issue debated through partisan linkages to one that candidates and voters understood as an intrinsic element of a partisan policy package. However, this shared understanding took on two forms. Clinton adapted Obama's strategy to fit her own strengths and drew on her support of Planned Parenthood to establish herself as a candidate committed to Democratic interests. Unlike Obama in the previous election, Clinton also discussed the details and rationale behind her position on abortion and Planned Parenthood funding. In contrast, Trump relied so heavily on abortion's place in the partisan package that he did not feel the need to present an agenda beyond a surface-level support of pro-life policies.

Planned Parenthood became more entrenched as a partisan symbol for abortion after the 2015 scandal, in which a conservative anti-abortion organization, the Center of Medical Progress, doctored videos allegedly showing Planned Parenthood officials selling the body parts of aborted fetuses. These videos captured public attention over the summer months and prompted several state investigations into Planned Parenthood services. No state found evidence of to support the CMP's claim, and the House Committee on Oversight and Reform released a report confirming Planned Parenthood's innocence.⁸² While legal battles ensued, Republican primary candidates continued to propagate the CMP's false narrative.⁸³ At the same time, Republicans in

⁸² House Committee on Oversight and Reform, "Planned Parenthood: Fact V. Fiction," accessed March 26, 2019, <https://oversight.house.gov/planned-parenthood-fact-v-fiction/>; Danielle Kurtzleben, "Planned Parenthood Investigations Find no Fetal Tissue Sales," last modified January 28, 2016, accessed Mar 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/28/464594826/in-wake-of-videos-planned-parenthood-investigations-find-no-fetal-tissue-sales>.

⁸³ Dave Levitan, "Unspinning the Planned Parenthood Video," last modified July 24, 2015, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.factcheck.org/2015/07/unspinning-the-planned-parenthood-video/>.

the House voted again to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, but the bill lost in the Senate.⁸⁴

While the controversy was legally and politically settled, it reignited the pro-life movement and altered the rhetoric surrounding Planned Parenthood. The organization had become well established as a pro-choice symbol and candidates still used it as a proxy for discussing abortion.

Clinton

Overall, Clinton continued Obama's strategy for discussing abortion with some changes. She more frequently linked abortion to women's rights, gay marriage, and gun violence while cutting back on linkages to health care and economic policies. Her issue linkages also exhibited a similar degree of partisanship to Obama's second campaign. However, the most significant shift she made was to repeatedly highlight the fact that Planned Parenthood had officially endorsed her to be president. Drawing on their endorsement required a well-rooted understanding of not only Planned Parenthood's symbolic representation of pro-choice views, but also the pro-choice position's status in the Democrat's policy package.

During the 2016 election, Clinton boasted about Planned Parenthood's endorsement of her to demonstrate her loyalty to social liberals in her party. She did this during both the primary and general elections. Instead of insulting Trump when asked about a dispute she had with him during the primary elections, she distinguished herself from him across issue positions including,

⁸⁴ Bill Chapell, "House Approves Bill to Cease Funding Planned Parenthood," last modified September 18, 2015, accessed Mar 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/18/441497807/house-approves-bill-to-cease-funding-planned-parenthood>.

“equal pay for women, raising the minimum wage, [and] protecting a woman's right to make the most personal health care decisions.”⁸⁵ Building off this last point, she expressed how she was

“So proud to have the endorsement of the Planned Parenthood Action Fund [...] because I'm going to fight as hard as I can against any efforts to defund Planned Parenthood, something that he supports. [...] But I am not going to let him or any of the other Republicans rip away the progress that women have made. It's been too hard-fought-for.”⁸⁶

In making these statements, she established herself as a voice of female voters while contrasting her views with those of Republicans. In doing so, she presented Republicans as anti-women and sexist, a common narrative during her campaign. She used comments like these to link abortion to women's rights to make partisan appeals to her audiences.

Not only did she use Planned Parenthood to give herself credibility, she also used it to endorse other Democrats running for Congress in states with contested seats.⁸⁷ She described them as either “defending Planned Parenthood” or “stand[ing] up for women's health 100 percent of the time, not just when it is politically convenient.”⁸⁸ Since two of the three candidates she endorsed this way were men, she projected her own credibility among women to their support. She also situated their pro-choice track record with their opposition of the gun lobby and support for gay rights.

⁸⁵ Hillary R. Clinton, “Interview with John Dickerson of CBS News,” (interview, January 10, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Hillary R. Clinton, “Remarks at the 71st Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel,” (speech, New York City, NY, October 22, 2016), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, “Remarks at Taylor Allderice High School,” (speech, Pittsburgh, PA, October 24, 2016), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, “Remarks at Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park,” (speech, Tampa, FL, October 26, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

⁸⁸ Hillary R. Clinton, “Remarks at the 71st Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel,” (speech, New York City, NY, October 22, 2016), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, “Remarks at Curtis Hixon Waterfront Park,” (speech, Tampa, FL, October 26, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

Her linkage of abortion with gun control and gay rights was, in fact, reflective of a broader trend. These issues, often considered culture war issues for their divisive nature, were not linked as strongly in any other campaign. No other candidates made linkages to gun rights, and they only made weak linkages between gay marriage and abortion. Clinton not only linked three divisive issues together, she even linked together their endorsements of her during the primary election. To illustrate that people working with important issues every day considered her to be a leader, she tied together her endorsements from the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, The Brady Campaign, Gabby Giffords and Mark Kelly, and the Human Rights Campaign. The middle two are gun control advocates while the latter endorsed Clinton for her support of the LGBT community.⁸⁹ In doing so, she established the Democratic party's treatment of these three issues as part of a policy package. She did this to distinguish herself from Bernie Sanders who was also a liberal and drew on these endorsements to present herself as the chosen voice of reputed liberal establishments.

Despite Planned Parenthood's status within the Democrat's policy package, Clinton still discussed the rationale behind her positions. This marked a deviation from Obama's approach in the previous election, where he only superficially discussed his abortion policy. However, she only engaged in these discussions when defending her positions against attack from Republican opponents. When interviewers raised how Republican primary candidates criticized her support for late-term abortions, she described in detail that, after meeting and talking to women who had them, she knew that they made these decisions after serious deliberation.⁹⁰ By centralizing the

⁸⁹ Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News," (interview, January 31, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

⁹⁰ Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with George Stephanopoulos of ABC News," (interview, February 7, 2016), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with John Dickerson of CBS News," (interview, February 7, 2016), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with John Dickerson of CBS News," (interview, September 20, 2015), The American Presidency Project.

role of women's agency in making the choice, she starkly differed from Obama's centrist strategy in the 2008 campaign.

Similarly, when asked questions in town halls and interviews about her continued support for Planned Parenthood despite its scandal, she defended her support by describing all the health and family services that it provided.⁹¹ Her deep knowledge of the organization's various health services reflects that she had prepared counterarguments to defend her stance. In doing so, she strongly linked abortion to health care and women's rights while criticizing Republicans who spread misinformation and opposed Planned Parenthood's funding. Because these clarifications came as defenses in response to direct questioning, it was strategic for her to bring up these details instead of relying on superficial appeals. When not provoked by others' questions, Clinton relied primarily on partisan issue linkages and policy packages to appeal to her audience.

Trump

Trump rarely discussed abortion through his campaign speeches and events. Evidence of his pro-choice position from previous years conflicted with his pro-life policies in the campaign and left voters in confusion over the credibility of his views. Trump also never said the word abortion during his campaign, although moderators used it to ask him clarifying questions. Trump responded with eleven mentions of the word pro-life in a single live audience interview and no keywords in another. While he tried to appeal to the Catholic Church as a moral authority on abortion policy, his appeal took the form of questions that never formed into a concrete

⁹¹ Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with Wolf Blitzer of CNN News," (interview, September 17, 2015), The American Presidency Project.; Hillary R. Clinton, "Interview with John Dickerson of CBS News," (interview, September 20, 2015), The American Presidency Project.

linkage. In the two relevant campaign stops included in the dataset, Trump stumbled through a heated interview in one and completely avoided answering town hall questions in another. His answers suggest that he did not feel the need to establish his positions beyond identifying as pro-life.

The most noteworthy moment of his campaign regarding abortion occurred when, during a town hall with MSNBC, Trump was asked about his “stance on women’s rights and their right to choose in their own reproductive health.”⁹² Trump promptly responded by saying he was pro-life, but he stumbled when the moderator, Chris Matthews, asked him about the legal implications of pro-life policies, specifically when banning abortion. The conversation devolved to a heated back and forth between Trump and Matthews in which Trump did not know his own position and even inquired about the Catholic Church’s positions before giving his own. Matthews was a Catholic, and Trump reverse-questioned him repeatedly to ask what Matthews’ beliefs were regarding the law. The following exchange shows how Trump ultimately chose a policy rather arbitrarily after much prodding by Matthews:

M: “Do you believe in punishment for abortion, yes or no as a principle?”

T: “The answer is that there has to be some form of punishment.”

M: “For the woman.”

T: “Yeah, there has to be some form.”

M: “Ten cents? Ten years? What?”

T: “I don’t know. That I don’t know. That I don’t know.”⁹³

At least as of this interview late into the primary elections, Trump was not aware of his own campaign’s platform on abortion. In the following afternoon, his campaign released a statement saying that, if abortion were banned, doctors would be punished for providing abortions while

⁹² Donald J. Trump, “Interview with Chris Matthews of MSNBC News,” (interview, March 30, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

⁹³ Ibid.

women, like the fetus, would be considered victims of their situation.⁹⁴ While punishing doctors coincides with the responses of some other Republicans, the statement's total rebuke of Trump's live response showed that his response was not rehearsed.

In another town hall held six days after he received the Republican nomination for the general election, Trump completely avoided responding to a direct question on his abortion policy. When asked if he “and the Republican Party are on the wrong side of history regarding abortion rights and gay marriage,” Trump responded with the following: “You'll have to see it in the polls David. You know what my positions are. You'll have to see it at the polls. [...] David my positions are down.”⁹⁵ Sidestepping an unswerving question suggests that he either still felt uncomfortable presenting his own policy views, or that he purposefully obscured them to avoid pushback. Regardless, his responses during the campaign left the public unsure of his exact policies. His over-reliance on the pro-life package reflected its entrenched status within the Republican party's policy package as Trump assumed that pro-life was a sufficient description of his abortion policies.

Taken together, these investigations of each election have demonstrated that candidates fundamentally transformed abortion from being a stand-alone issue worthy of debate to one entrenched in partisan policy packages. While centrist and bipartisan appeals dominated the abortion debate in the 2008 election, partisanship increased in later election cycles through the use of Planned Parenthood as a symbol for pro-abortion stances. In addition to references to opposing parties and candidates by name, issue linkages emerged as a distinct tool capable of carrying partisan connotations. Linkages to economic policy and religion became more common

⁹⁴ Donald J. Trump, "Interview with Chris Matthews of MSNBC News," (interview, March 30, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

⁹⁵ Donald J. Trump, "News Conference," (town hall, Doral, FL, July 27, 2016), The American Presidency Project.

in 2012 while those to health care and women's rights took on stronger partisan characteristics. Clinton continued Obama's trends from 2012 while increasing linkages to women's rights, gay marriage, and gun violence. Meanwhile Trump deviated from all other candidates by lacking clarity on his own abortion policies. However, his reliance on the term pro-life and Clinton's use of endorsements reflected abortions' placement in partisan policy packages.

Chapter 7: Discussion

My analysis in the previous two chapters illuminated the dynamic nature of the abortion debate across content and partisanship. I demonstrated how, over the course of three elections, candidates used issue linkages to entrench abortion into partisan policy packages. In this chapter, I discuss the impact of issue linkages on the abortion debate followed by their implications for candidates, voters, and scholars.

Abortion Debate

Key changes in the abortion debate have pushed it from being a culture war issue to one embedded within economic planning, health care, and equal rights. Abortion's affiliation with Planned Parenthood facilitated the shift towards economic planning and equal rights linkages while the centralization of the ACA made health care linkages more partisan than before. As such, abortion was no longer an isolated issue on which proponents and opponents could disagree.

While issue linkages seem like a natural component of political speech, these three election cycles represent a critical moment in which candidates used them to reconstruct the abortion debate. Candidates during the 2008 election still discussed abortion through their own beliefs regarding its morality, legality and prevalence. However, candidates in later elections refocused discussions on the interplay between abortion and other issues when, in fact, abortion was a relatively isolated subject. For all but those directly involved with policy-making, considering abortion with any regard to the economy is a stretch of the imagination. Despite Republican's accusations of Planned Parenthood, federal funds cannot directly subsidize the provision of abortions. Even if their accusations were true, candidates used Planned Parenthood

funding to present and attack one another's tax and spending policies. Republican candidates also overlaid the role of abortion in women's health care such that the two terms were synonymous.

Candidates from both parties also exaggerated abortion's connection to the ACA, especially given that policies relevant to abortion comprised just a negligible portion of the whole law. Furthermore, any linkage between the ACA and abortion during the 2012 election was speculative since the policy was implemented in 2014. In practice, the ACA increased some insurance coverage for abortion services and substantial coverage for birth control. Since the ACA only reduced the number of uninsured people by about half, it extended coverage for elective abortions to far fewer than the best-case estimate of 5.8 million women.⁹⁶ The ACA substantially increased insurance coverage for contraceptive methods, though scholars have yet to measure its direct impact on the decline in abortions. By presenting abortion through unintuitive issue linkages, candidates shifted its debate away from policy substance.

Politicians, Voters, and Political Culture

Candidates benefitted from discussing abortion through strong partisan issue linkages for a number of reasons. First, linkages allowed candidates to present their policies as a coherent narrative to the public, even if the issues did not strongly relate to one another. Second, they enabled candidates to superficially present their abortion positions without engaging with abortion's morally triggering and taboo nature. Third, the partisan nature of some issue linkages

⁹⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation, "Key Facts about the Uninsured Population," last modified December 7, 2018, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/fact-sheet/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>; Alina Salganicoff, Adara Beamesderfer, Nisha Kurani, and Laurie Sobel, "Coverage for Abortion Services and the ACA." *Kaiser Family Foundation*, last modified September 19, 2014, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/coverage-for-abortion-services-and-the-aca/>.

let candidates trigger reflexive audience reactions in their favor. Synthesizing the latter two points, the establishment of abortion within partisan policy packages allowed candidates to win an audience's support without having to explain any policy or linkage whatsoever. Clinton and Trump could simply associated themselves with surface-level representations of policy stances (receiving Planned Parenthood's endorsement or being a pro-life candidate) and illicit yes or no support from their voters without dividing them across a spectrum of policy options. The benefits outline above make it progressively easier for candidates to get partisan support without having to answer hard questions to convince their audiences.

Unsurprisingly, politicians' use of partisan issue linkages fosters a divided environment among politicians and voters. When presidential candidates package policies together in front of large audiences, they promise to defend a policy stance across multiple dimensions. Although doing so entails many benefits and even wins votes, it reduces the number of negotiable dimensions for future compromise. In other words, publicly taking a strong policy stance makes later compromises seem like bigger losses, even if the compromises are necessary steps towards achieving one's policy goals. Accordingly, partisan linkages between abortion, economic policy, health care, and women's rights complicate future negotiations of abortion policy along the latter three fronts.

Accordingly, partisan issue linkages make voters choose between restrictive policy packages that encourage an alignment between party and ideology. In this study, the packages imply that, based on one's abortion position, one must also adopt ideologically consistent beliefs across economic, health care, and various rights issues. Whereas in the 2008 election, voters could listen to candidate speeches and comfortably disagree across different policies, the partisan policy packages in the 2016 election were far more coercive. In 2016, a consistently pro-life

individual necessarily confronts the reality that he favors – at least when relevant to abortion – a smaller economic footprint for the government, less autonomy to make health care decisions, and fewer women’s rights. Similarly, a consistently pro-choice individual must to some degree favor a larger economic role of the government, more choice to make health care decisions, and more women’s rights. I draw out these policy packages to illustrate how extreme they appear, especially when considering that the issue linkages are not even intuitive for voters. A consistent pro-life or choice believer suddenly behaves like a fully partisan Republican or Democrat, respectively. Of course, individuals are often inconsistent in their beliefs and will not always exhibit such extreme forms of partisan alignment. However, the tremendous salience of abortion makes it more likely than other issues to compel voters towards one package or another. Such linkages move the status quos for both parties towards their respective ideological poles, resulting in a more divided political climate.

As just one element of a rapidly growing media environment, presidential speeches are likely declining in their relative ability to influence voter opinion. Only a small portion of voters actually attend these speeches or view them beyond short clips through media platforms. Scholars should continue studying political information in forms that voters consume it, namely through various news and social media platforms. However, they should incorporate analyses of issue linkages moving forward. I have shown that linkages can drastically change the discussion of a given issue and convey their own partisan references. In addition to similar qualitative studies to this one, researchers should explore options in machine learning to scale studies of issue linkages across large platforms.

Although this study is limited to the scope of abortion, the mere presence of issue-linkages by definition permits the model to be generalizeable for explaining partisanship in other

issues. All of the issues to which candidates linked abortion gained additional partisan dimensions in return. Because candidates often tied abortion to multiple issues in the same discussion, they also linked those issues together as well. For example, Romney opposed the ACA on the grounds that it was a bad economic policy instead of opposing its health care goals. Similarly, Obama and Clinton frequently described the ACA as a policy that empowered women to make health care decisions by increasing their access to insurance. They also emphasized the ACA's economic benefits of creating inclusive and equal workplaces for men and women. In general, politicians draw on the complementary features of their own policy stances to illustrate consistent narratives. In doing so, they inherently link issues in the process. Their rhetoric when presenting these linkages determines whether or not they convey partisan appeals or shift away from discussing a position's substance.

Limitations

The limitations to this study include those pertaining to its data and methods. Though they are significant, they do not substantially jeopardize the general findings or their implications.

The database of speeches was neither a complete nor random sample of all primary and general election speeches. As a result, the statistical tests and relationships seen across variables are subject to sampling bias. While this could skew the findings of this study, especially those that synthesize trends across candidates, other scholars have identified the database as the most comprehensive one available and have treated drawn meaningful results from it. Furthermore, because the dataset contains the majority of speeches made, it has likely captured most relevant speeches with fewer biases.

Because the data was limited to presidential campaign speeches, my findings do not capture alternative forms of communication such as advertisements and social media. Given the rising popularity of online platforms like Twitter, more recent candidates could have delegated certain types of communication to the audiences on each platform. For instance, candidates could target younger voters on Twitter with different strategies than their mass appeals through speeches.

My methods were also subject to numerous limitations. I faced a fundamental tradeoff between depth and breadth when analyzing the speeches for issue linkages. The advantage of qualitatively coding the text was that I could capture implicit and explicit linkages between issues. I considered using an entirely quantitative approach based on the proximity of the discussion for multiple issues. However, I realized that that approach would capture too many relationships that were merely adjacent mentions of issues, but not related ones. Unfortunately, my reliance on manual coding limited the study's scope to abortion, an issue that is narrowly defined and has a small number of mentions. In other words, I sacrificed generalizability for internally valid results.

Lastly, this study did not use multiple coders to ensure inter-coder reliability and a higher degree of internal validity. I conducted this project for my senior thesis, and as such did not have additional resources to cross-check thematic coding. I mitigated this uncertainty by strictly defining the issue linkages in Chapter 2 and thoroughly annotating observations for each speech on Nvivo.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This study set out to understand trends in presidential candidates' partisan rhetoric through a case study of developments in the abortion debate. To do so, I filtered presidential campaign speeches for each party's nomination during the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections that contained keywords relevant to abortion. I subsequently coded them for issue linkages and partisan references to the opposing party.

I found that, while Obama and McCain used clear language to explain and justify their abortion positions in the 2008 election, subsequent candidates used increasingly partisan issue linkages to discuss abortion simultaneously with other issues. By the 2016 election, abortion had become so engrained amidst a partisan package of policies that candidates could draw on superficial references to their positions to appeal to their voters. This development enabled candidates to efficiently trigger partisan support without dividing voters along policy options. However, it came at the expense of limiting information to voters and their options across various positions.

In addition, I demonstrated that candidates had vastly transformed the way in which they discussed abortion by changing their issue linkages, word choice, and use of partisan references. In the 2008 election, Obama and McCain primarily made weak issue linkages to abortion and only engaged in partisan rhetoric to attack one another after an event that directly contrasted their positions. Starting in the 2012 election, candidates frequently spoke about abortion indirectly by using Planned Parenthood as a symbol for pro-abortion policies. This allowed candidates to make more linkages to economic policies. It also enabled Democrats to make more issue linkages to women's rights while Republicans made more linkages to religion. Both parties'

linkages contained stronger partisan appeals in later years, with those to health care taking on an especially strong appeals due to the centralization of the ACA in discussions.

These findings suggest that Political Scientists' previous understanding of partisan rhetoric was incomplete, as its presence in issue linkages went previously uncaptured. They served as a proof of concept for the existence and importance of studying issue linkages as rhetorical tools for delivering partisan appeals. They further demonstrate that the abortion debate is still dynamic and deserves ongoing study.

Future studies of political rhetoric and partisan language should consider tools like issue framing and issue linkages. Having demonstrated the potential impact of issue linkages in this study, scholars should use a mix of qualitative research and natural language processing technology to identify similar linkages across different kinds of issues. Doing so would provide a more complete understanding of partisan language among presidential candidates. It would also identify the degree to which issue positions are tied to one another among candidates. Judging the homogeneity or heterogeneity of linkages across candidates offers insights to the diversity of thought among politicians. Of course, these methods can be applied to any medium of political rhetoric, including the speeches, debates, or Tweets of candidates and current office holders. Researchers should also investigate the impact of issue linkages on voter perceptions and beliefs to gauge their uptake of political rhetoric. It would be useful to compare their effectiveness to other partisan tools like issue frames, symbols, and name calling to better understand how discourse can change perceptions.

One of the fundamental goals of all researchers is to explain the world around them. The growing divide in American social and political culture has become an extremely pressing concern. It is imperative for scholars to understand the factors contributing to its progression and

its implications moving forward. Investigating the partisan rhetoric of political leaders empowers scholars to better explain the nation's divided condition. Because political leaders influence popular discourse, and to some degree, voters' beliefs, scholars should continue to explore their rhetoric to recognize how people think about political issues and culture.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Partisanship, Word Choice, and Issue Linkages by Candidate

Row Labels		2008				2012				2016				Total
		Obama		McCain		Obama		Romney		Clinton		Trump		
Partisanship	Partisan	2	29%	1	14%	27	93%	3	75%	13	81%	0	0%	46
	Non-Partisan	1	14%	5	71%	2	7%	0	0%	3	19%	2	100%	13
	Bipartisan	4	57%	1	14%	0	0%	1	25%	0	0%	0	0%	6
	Total	7	100%	7	100%	29	100%	4	100%	16	100%	2	100%	65
Word Choice	Abort-Planned Parenthood	29	64%	12	38%	0	0%	9	47%	21	20%	3	23%	74
	Contraception	0	0%	0	0%	56	71%	8	42%	72	70%	0	0%	136
	Pro-Life	4	9%	0	0%	23	29%	0	0%	2	2%	0	0%	29
	Pro-Choice	2	4%	13	41%	0	0%	1	5%	0	0%	10	77%	26
	Roe	3	7%	2	6%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	5
	Reproductive Fetus	6	13%	5	16%	0	0%	1	5%	5	5%	0	0%	17
		1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%	2
		0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	2%	0	0%	2
	Total	45	100%	32	100%	79	100%	19	100%	103	100%	13	100%	291
Issue Linkages	Healthcare	3	30%	1	9%	29	40%	2	22%	9	25%	0	0%	44
	Economy	1	10%	0	0%	21	29%	3	33%	8	22%	0	0%	33
	Religion	2	20%	0	0%	1	1%	2	22%	0	0%	1	100%	6
	Defense	0	0%	4	36%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	4
	Women's Rights	2	20%	0	0%	9	13%	0	0%	8	22%	0	0%	19
	Fetus Rights	1	10%	5	45%	0	0%	1	11%	0	0%	0	0%	7
	LGBT Rights	1	10%	1	9%	12	17%	1	11%	7	19%	0	0%	22
	Gun Control	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	4	11%	0	0%	4
Total	10	100%	11	100%	72	100%	9	100%	36	100%	1	100%	139	