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Michael M. Franz*

Interest Group Issue Appeals: Evidence of Issue Convergence in Senate and Presidential Elections, 2008–2014

Abstract: Interest groups now play a prominent role in the air war. Their collective investment in election campaigns has skyrocketed in the aftermath of *Citizens United*. Yet questions remain about whether interest group advertising affects the content of the specific issues being discussed. Do groups enter campaigns and engage voters on the same issues as their candidate allies? Or does the presence of more advertisers introduce competitive issue streams? This paper examines ad buys in Senate elections between 2008 and 2014 and the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012. A primary goal of the paper is to uncover the effect of high and low levels of “issue convergence” on election outcomes. Strategists often express concern that too many voices on behalf of a candidate can weaken the impact of ads. One might expect that as convergence between a candidate and his or her allies goes up (meaning the issue content of the ad buys overlaps across advertisers), the impact of ads on votes will increase. Ad effects should be weaker when a candidate’s ads discuss different issues from allied groups and party committees. The results, however, suggest that high rates of issue convergence are only weakly related to election outcomes (and not always in consistent ways).

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Introduction

The 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v FEC* cleared the way for a series of judicial and regulatory rulings that overturned previous restrictions on who could fund political ads, emboldening outside groups in their pursuit of electoral influence (Franz 2013, pp. 63–65). To many, the presence of outside groups, unfettered by restrictions on funding, is part and parcel of an American political system tending towards oligarchy (Gilens and Page 2014). To others, because the balance of spending in 2012 favored Republicans – and because Republicans lost

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the presidential election and every competitive Senate race – the real effect of outside spending is still in question. The true impact of a post-*Citizens United* political system is yet to be known.

Two questions in this regard are derivative of these concerns. The first is largely descriptive. We know that spending by outside groups in federal elections is high, and growing with each cycle. Yet we know little about how interest group advertising affects the content of the specific issues being discussed. Do interest groups contribute to the issue agenda as established by the candidates and their party committees? Or do groups introduce a competing array of issues?

It is not clear at the outset what pro-candidate groups might hope to accomplish in the selection of their issues. Some, or perhaps most, groups might wish to bolster candidates with ads on issues that candidates are talking about. This appeared to be a primary concern of many groups in 2014, for example. A November report in the *Washington Post* noted:

... candidates and independent groups have sought to bring their operations in alignment as much as possible this year. To help allies fashion their plans, Democratic and Republican congressional committees posted detailed opposition research books and talking points about individual candidates on their Web sites. And it is now standard practice for candidates to share suggested television ad scripts and video footage online – materials that are then scooped up by outside groups and turned into television spots.¹

Alternatively, interest groups might look to provide cover for candidates on tricky, unpopular, or controversial issues. Or, groups may just have issue agendas unconnected to the dynamics of the race itself. In that sense, the first question of the paper concerns the degree of issue overlap between candidates, party committees, and supportive interest groups. There is very little scholarship on even this initial question.

The second question follows from the first. Once we know the distribution of issue coverage across sponsors in a campaign, how does issue divergence, and alternatively significant issue overlap, affect the performance of a candidate on Election Day? On the one hand, the ability of interest groups to influence the campaign agenda (that is, with new or previously unmentioned issues) may complicate the persuasive power of the collective ad buy on behalf of candidates. Strategists often express concern that too many voices on behalf of a candidate may weaken the impact of ads, for example. New advertisers introducing new issues (or focusing on some more than candidates) may make the narrative

¹ “A New Level of Collaboration Between Candidates and Big Money Allies,” *Washington Post*, by Matea Gold, 11/4/14.

a candidate is hoping to convey more difficult. On the other hand, ads about certain issues could provide candidates additional coverage, bolstering the sense that a candidate is competent on a range of critical issues. As holes develop in a candidate's case for elected office, for example, wide issue coverage from diverse sponsorship may help candidates stake out a broad defensive front.

In this research, I examine ad buys in Senate and presidential elections between 2008 and 2014, modeling county-level vote outcomes as a function of the issue convergence in the race. I operationalize issue convergence in ways similar to previous scholarship, though this research has focused almost exclusively on candidates. I begin, however, with a brief review of the rise of outside spending in recent election cycles, with a specific focus on the 2014 campaign. I then establish my expectations, followed by a discussion of the data and measurement. This is followed by a review of the distribution of issue convergence across races and sponsors. In my subsequent discussion of convergence effects on election outcomes, I pay particular attention to challenges of estimation. All told, the results reveal very little consistency in effects. One clear inference from that inconsistency is that levels of issue convergence seem unrelated to electoral success. I finish the paper by tying these results to a set of broader implications about the health of the electoral process.

First Things First: Making Clear the Trends

Changes in ad sponsorship have been stark in recent elections. Much of this has been driven by changes in the campaign finance legal environment, with canonical Court rulings in *Wisconsin Right to Life* (2007) and *Citizens United* (2010), among others. A review of the ad trends is rich in detail and a compelling narrative in its own right. Consider Figure 1, which shows the percentage of ads aired in presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial elections back to 2000 (using data from the Wesleyan Media Project and the Wisconsin Advertising Project).²

The denominator in this analysis is as inclusive as the data will allow, using the top 75 media markets for early elections but the full slate of 210 media markets

² These data only include ads aired on local broadcast stations and national cable stations. They exclude local cable buys, radio ads, and digital or online ads. We lack comprehensive data on these forms of voter outreach, but a report by Borrell Associates in early 2012 estimated that broadcast ads would account for 57% of political ad spending in that cycle (inclusive of direct mail, telemarketing, and print, in addition to the sources listed above). This report is available on request. See also <https://www.borrellassociates.com/industry-papers/papers/political-advertising-the-flood-of-2012-detail> (accessed 12/5/14).

after 2006. It also includes all ads aired in the election year. For Governor, I combine two election cycles (when possible) given that midterm cycles feature over 30 gubernatorial contests.³ For congressional elections, I combine the cycles between 2000 and 2006 (in part because group spending in these earlier elections was less intense), but show election-specific trends thereafter.

In each of the four panels of Figure 1, the share of outside spending has grown in recent years. (I show also the percentage of ads from the party committees.) Interest group spending in governor's races in 2000 and 2002 was nearly nonexistent, but such ads accounted for nearly 1 in 5 in 2014. Adding party spending in 2014 brings the total non-candidate ad share to 40%, double the gubernatorial elections of 2008 and 2010. Group spending in the Senate races of 2000–2006

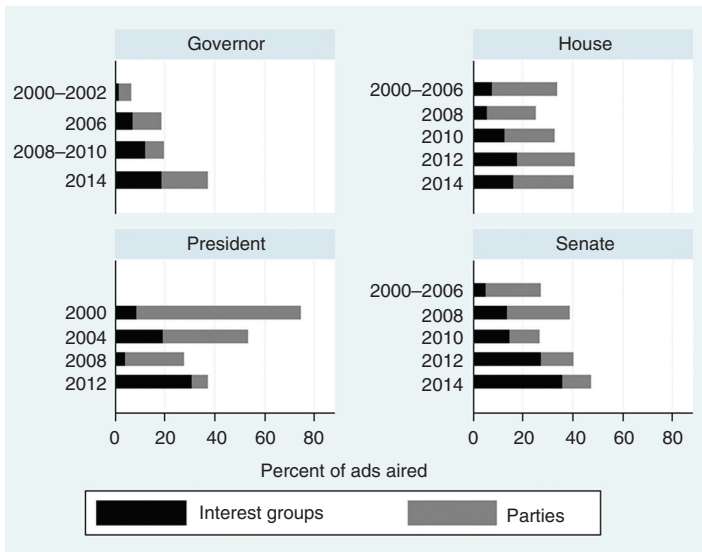


Figure 1

Source: Wesleyan Media Project.
 2008–2014 count ads in all media markets.
 Pre-2008 are for top 75 or 100 markets.
 Gov 2004 ads are not available.
 Prez plot is for general election.
 Other races for all ads in the election year.

³ This analysis leaves out the five states that hold gubernatorial elections in off-years: Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia.

(with over 1.2 million total ads aired in that time frame) was about 5%, but it was nearly 37% in 2014. Outside spending was also at near-record levels in the 2014 set of House elections. Despite two cycles (2012 and 2014) where control of the lower chamber was not in question, interest groups aired nearly 1 in every 5 ads. Party spending – always more vigorous in the House – brings the total in both cycles to 40% of all ads aired.⁴

Figure 2 shows the share of interest group spending in congressional or gubernatorial elections in 2014 where at least 15,000 ads aired. Seven contests for Governor featured around 40% or more of all ads. In the race for Governor of Michigan, for example, outside groups – primarily the Democratic and Republican Governors' Associations – aired 60% of all ads. In seven Senate elections, outside groups were responsible for at least 2 of every 5 ads. This included Mississippi and (again) Michigan. In the former, eight different groups jockeyed for influence in the Republican primary contest between incumbent Thad Cochran and challenger Chris McDaniel. These included the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Realtors, Senate Conservatives Action, and the Club for Growth. In the Michigan contest, AFSCME (a labor union), the conservative Ending Spending Action Fund, the National Association of Realtors, Americans for Prosperity, and twelve other groups committed some resources to the general election.

All told in 2014, 2.5 million ad airings were recorded in the Wesleyan Media Project data for congressional and gubernatorial elections. Of these, just under 1 in 4 were sponsored by outside groups, and 18% were from the party committees. This combined effort (excepting the presidential campaign in 2000) is unlike any level of investment seen in the entirety of the available advertising data.

Issue Convergence as a Persuasion Tool?

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to whether and how advertising persuades (Goldstein and Freedman 2000; Shaw 2006; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Ridout and Franz 2011). The vast majority of – especially observational – scholarship, however, largely glosses over the *content* differences of ads in assessing

⁴ The trends noted in the presidential panel are also noteworthy. In the party soft money election of 2000 – when Bush and Gore also opted into the general election public funding system – party ad spending was just shy of two-thirds of all ads aired. The party contribution was nearly non-existent in 2012, replaced by a cadre of super PACs and non-profit groups (see also Franz 2013).

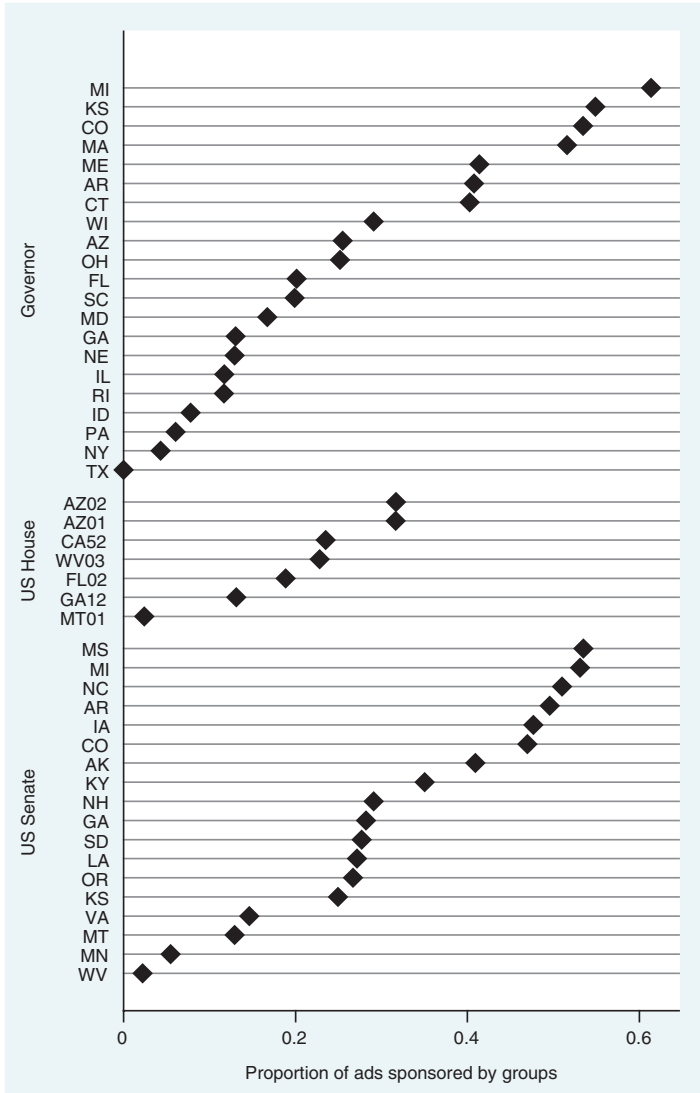


Figure 2
 Source: Wesleyan Media Project.
 For all ads aired in the race in 2014.
 Only races with at least 15,000 ads are shown.

their influence on vote choice and candidate favorability. Indeed, research typically privileges a measure of the relative *balance* of advertising (measured as the total numerical ad advantage of one candidate over another) in a given market as

a primary indicator of who is winning the ad war (e.g., Franz and Ridout 2010; Franz 2013).

On the other hand, scholars of campaign advertising have committed considerable resources to addressing the *tone* of ads. From this rich scholarship, we know less than we might expect, as evidence on whether negative or positive ads are more persuasive is simply inconclusive (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). More definitive is the evidence that negativity is more memorable, aids learning, and enhances information-seeking (Martin 2004). Some scholars have broadened the discussion of tone to include the emotional appeals in ads, positing that negativity alone may not be as important as appeals to anger and/or fear (Brader 2006). Yet findings in this area are idiosyncratic (Ridout and Franz 2011).⁵

The rise of interest group advertising has renewed a focus on classical work about how credibility of message senders may aid or inhibit a message's influence (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Klapper 1960; McGuire 1986; Sears and Whitney 1973). More specifically, new work has tackled the influence of *sponsor* on persuasion and backlash. Some evidence in this area suggests that ads sponsored by outside groups are more effective than candidate ads, in part because voters are less likely to punish a candidate for an attack sponsored by an unaffiliated group (Brooks and Murov 2012).⁶

From the perspective of campaign advertising and persuasion, there is almost no scholarship on the question of whether multi-dimensionality in campaign messages moderates their effectiveness. Studies of agenda-setting argue that increased exposure to an issue topic increases perceived importance among citizens (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007), and recent scholarship has examined the influence of competing frames on a given topic (Chong and Druckman 2007). To that extent, repeated exposure to ads on an issue or cluster of issues may enhance their persuasive effects over a scattershot of issue mentions.

Most of the existing scholarship on the question focuses on candidate issue convergence. From this perspective, much has been learned, but we do not know yet how levels of convergence within partisan networks translate to electoral

5 Another strain of research focuses on message focus. Research substantiates, for example, that campaigns that prime issues *important* to the receiver may be privileged (e.g., Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). A growing scholarship on the policy components of political ads suggests also that voters like *policy-based* criticism over mudslinging or personal attacks. Fridkin and Kenney (2008) find that negative ads deemed *relevant* to a campaign are most influential in affecting evaluations of candidates.

6 However, the success of group-sponsored ads may be moderated by how much information voters have about the group (Weber, Dunaway, and Johnson 2012) or its financial backing (Wichowsky and Dowling 2011).

effects. Even still, the scholarship on candidate dialogue is important for lots of reasons. Kaplan, Park, and Ridout (2006) establish that while theories of “issue ownership” expect candidates to talk very little about the same set of issues, focusing instead on the issues on which they have an advantage, in fact candidates do engage one another, and more so in competitive elections. They take this as a positive for expectations of deliberation in electoral settings.

Similarly, Sides (2007) finds that Republicans and Democrats in congressional races between 1998 and 2002 regularly “trespassed” on issues classified as “owned” by the other party. Sides notes that Republican and Democratic ad time on an issue were strongly correlated, demonstrating “that the two parties were not ‘talking past’ each other but tended to emphasize the same limited set of issues” (p. 475). Most importantly, his analysis finds very little effects of issue trespassing on election outcomes. Whether candidates devoted more or less time to issues classified as “owned” by their party mattered very little for how a candidate performed with voters. He concludes: “Arguably, candidates are free to pursue an agenda of their choosing, without scrupulous adherence to either an ownership or salience strategy” (p. 482). In other words, whether candidates engage on the same issues or talk disparately about their own advantaged issues is not likely to win or lose many votes. He ascribes these effects more broadly to a “minimal effects” model of campaigns.

Lipsitz (2013) offers a more pessimistic assessment of the effects of issue dialogue.⁷ Her analysis of presidential ads in 2000 and 2004 does not focus on voter persuasion, but instead considers issue convergence on voter knowledge of candidate issue positions. Because “candidates frequently have incentives to obfuscate and prevaricate,” candidate discussion of an issue (and even engagement on the issue with an opponent) does not obviously imply greater voter knowledge (pp. 2–3). In fact, her results demonstrate that low-interest voters are sometimes less likely to identify a candidate’s issue position when both candidates talked about the issue in their ads. In this sense, convergence as a measure and indicator of candidate dialogue does not obviously produce the outcomes we would hope.

How can we apply this research, and the concept of issue convergence, to ads within a party but across candidate, group, and party sponsors? One could start by tying into the journalistic narrative following the 2012 campaign, which

⁷ In fact, she does not like the conflation of dialogue with estimates of issue convergence. As such, I have attempted to avoid inter-changing the two concepts, as her point is important. None of the measures of issue convergence, including the one I adopt in this paper, measures dialogue between or among political actors. It only compares attention to an issue across the full set of issue mentions.

emphasized that money spent by outside groups on political advertising was largely wasted. One reason given for this was that independent expenditure ads, because of limits on coordination with the campaigns, were unable to use video supplied by the preferred candidate, which may have forced them into airing attack ads even when they might have been better served by going positive (Alter 2013). This could be extended into the issue debates within the ads as well. Without a coordination strategy that allows an issue narrative to cross sponsors, ads from outside groups might conceivably introduce too many issue considerations, thereby potentially weakening the overall effect of ads.

In other words, persuasion effects may be greatest in campaigns in which candidates and independent groups focus on the same set of issues. For one, the convergent agenda will increase the likelihood that citizens view the particular issue or issues as important and in need of being addressed. Additionally, multiple ads on the same issue are unlikely to feature identical argumentation, and therefore, the increased attention to different aspects of the issue from one particular side will increase the likelihood that at least one of the arguments resonates with a citizen enough for it to be factored into his or her opinion. Finally, the repetition of a given issue topic or topics from multiple sources is likely to further reinforce opinion processing.⁸

On the other hand, the literature noted earlier suggests that outside group ads are often found to be more effective. This is true in the experimental (which is most of the scholarship) as well as observational research (e.g., Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2013). Perhaps it matters little what issues are in the ads, especially if voters respond more to sponsor-based cues. And if outside groups are more effective at making electoral appeals than the candidates themselves – perhaps because they can attack without consequence or because they appear more credible (both causal mechanisms asserted in the literature) – then the issues introduced by such groups may be more important to voters than whatever the candidates put forth.

In truth, there is not much theoretical help in the available literature on campaign advertising, what with the disproportionate focus on ad volume and tone.

⁸ The influence of convergent interest group advertising, however, is likely to be modified by their perceived credibility on the issue in question. In other words, independent groups with a narrow agenda (e.g., environmental groups) may have less persuasive impact on the public if convergence with the candidate leads them to advertise on issue areas outside their realm of expertise (e.g., foreign policy or health care). As discussed below, I do not address this heterogeneity possibly introduced by the interaction of sponsor and issue selection. I focus instead on a campaign level measure of issue convergence that collapses all interest groups within party.

With dozens and dozens of issues open for political actors to draw on, we know little about the effect on persuasion of diverse mixes of issue appeals.

Data and Measurement

To measure the issue focus of candidates, interest groups, and political parties, I rely on advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (WAP) in 2008 and the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP) between 2010 and 2014.⁹ Both projects tracked and coded political advertisements in all 210 media markets in the US. The unit of analysis in these data is each airing of a political advertisement. The data record the date and time of each airing, as well as the media market it aired in. Coders assessed each unique ad on a variety of characteristics and noted each unique issue mention. I examined ads aired by candidates (including party *coordinated* spots), party committees (using their independent expenditures), and outside groups in both the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 and the inclusive set of Senate races between 2008 and 2014. I analyze here only ads that aired after August 31, because interest group and party advertising was most intense during this time period, and it allows me to mostly avoid mixing primary and general election advertising.¹⁰

The data also contain extensive information about the issues addressed in each ad. Project staff were given a list of 60 issues and asked to identify all of the issue references made in the ad. The number of issues that coders could record for each ad was unlimited.¹¹ I measure the level of issue convergence 1) between interest groups and their preferred candidates; 2) between parties and their

⁹ The coding of political ads from any election cycle is a process that takes both time and care. As of this writing, 94% of the nearly 600,000 ad airings in the fall 2014 Senate elections have been coded. However, inter-coder reliability tests and data cleaning will take additional time. The evidence presented here may change slightly in light of any data cleaning on coder issue assignments.

¹⁰ Lipsitz (2013) rightly notes (p. 3) that calculations of issue convergence across a full campaign miss important temporal relationships. Because Majority PAC and Sherrod Brown (OH), for example, talk about health care in 20% of their ads does not mean that they did so at the same time. Still, this similar level of attention, even across 8 weeks, is an important representation of the way different sponsors can alter the overall issue agenda.

¹¹ The WMP recently assessed the reliability of the issue coding in the pre-2014 data by asking seven coders to code the same 32 ads. The average number of issues identified by each coder ranged from 2.4 to 2.7. I report the kappa statistic for those issues that averaged at least 1 mention per coder across the 32 ads. Focusing on these 17 issues yielded a range from 0.41 to 1. The average kappa was 0.85 with a median of 0.86. Kappa was below 0.70 for only two issues: local issues and the recession/economic stimulus.

preferred candidates; and 3) between candidates. One could add here a discussion of convergence across parties and sponsors, looking at such levels between pro-Democratic and pro-Republican interest groups, for example, or between the opposing party committees. I leave that analysis to future work, however.

I measure issue convergence similarly to recent scholarship. Like Sigelman and Buell (2004), I measure issue convergence directly as the level of issue discussion on the same set of topics. As described below, the measure accounts for the different issues covered by different sponsors, along with the proportionate attention paid to those issues. A group that devotes the same proportionate attention to an issue is considered more convergent. Like Kaplan, Park, and Ridout (2006), I use televised political ads to measure convergence. They defend their focus on ads this way: "... the content of candidate advertising is a clear and direct indicator of which issues the candidate prioritizes. Advertising is unfiltered by reporters and is broadcast directly to voters. Moreover, because advertising is costly to produce, campaigns put much more thought into the messages they want to convey" (p. 727).

Because each ad is coded on every issue mention from a list of about 60, I aggregate the political ad data up to the level of the favored candidate and sponsor.¹² I then calculate the proportion of total ads aired by each campaign/group or campaign/party on each issue topic. Using a method advocated by Sides (2006), I weight ads that contain more than one issue mention to reflect the number of mentions. In other words, for an ad with only a single issue mention, that mention is coded as 1. For an ad that mentioned, say, health care and education, each issue is given a weight of 0.5. The mean number of unweighted issue mentions per ad airing in the 2008 Senate data was 2.2; it was 2.7 in 2010, 2.6 in 2012, and 2.0 in 2014. Issues on the 2008–2014 coding sheets are listed in the Supplemental Material.

To understand better the estimation of issue convergence, consider first the distribution of issue mentions in Figure 3. For illustrative purposes, this graph combines all ads aired in the fall for Senate contests in 2014. It ranks the proportionate attention paid to each issue by Republican and Democratic candidates, along with the proportionate attention from allied groups and party committees.¹³

For Democrats, candidates focused (in their top four) on jobs, taxes, education, and women's health. (As described above, I weighted mentions in ads on the

¹² Presidential ads are aggregated up to the market-level; Senate ads are aggregated up to the state/market level.

¹³ I assigned Independent Greg Orman in Kansas to be a Democrat for this analysis. Similarly, any interest group ads spent on his behalf are counted as pro-Democratic ads. There are no substantive changes to the analysis if Orman is excluded from the data.

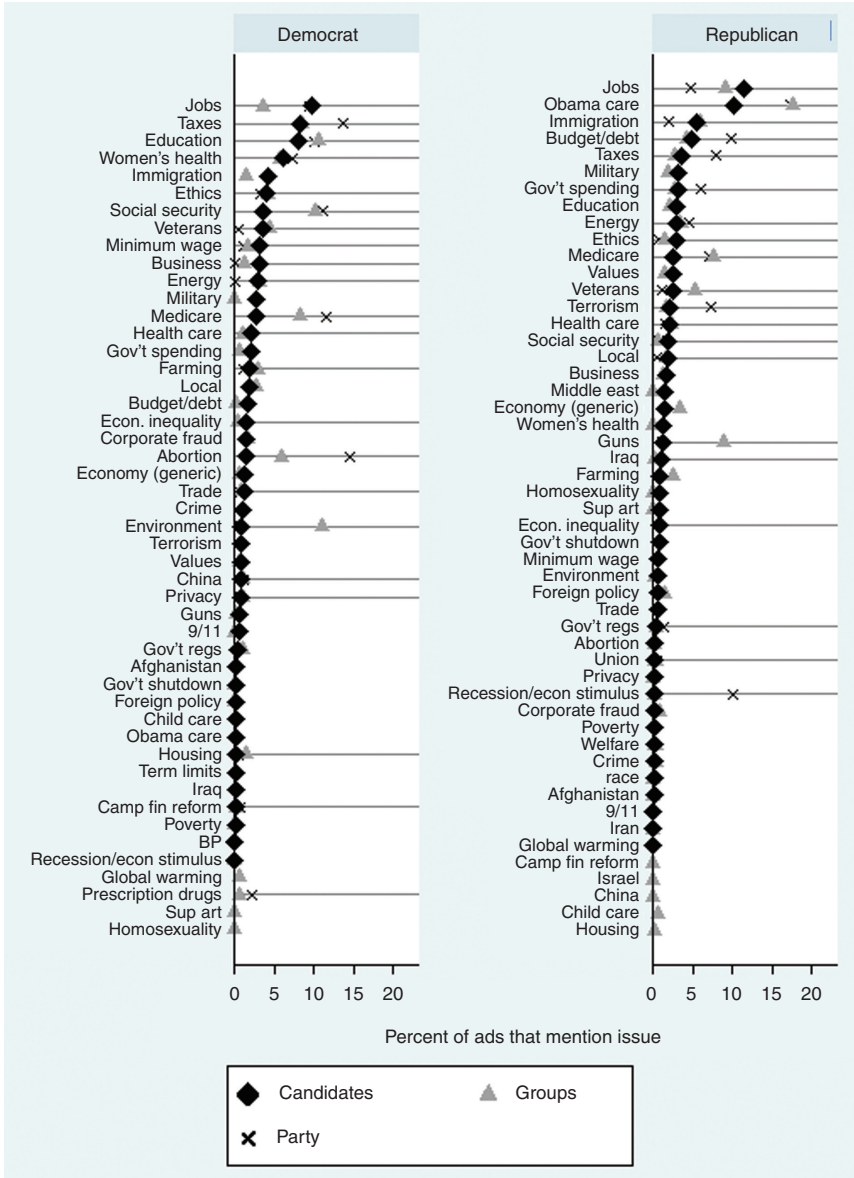


Figure 3
 Source: Wesleyan Media Project.
 Senate ads in 2014 aired after August.
 Percents are weighted by issue mentions in each ad.
 Only issues >0% are included.

basis of the total issues noted in the airing. As such, these totals refer to the percentage of mentions for the specific issue across all unique issue mentions in the data.) Top party mentions were abortion, Medicare, taxes, and education. Pro-Democratic groups focused on the environment, Medicare, Social Security, and education. The party, candidates, and groups devoted proportionate attention to a range of issues, including education and women's health, and the vast majority of issues received little to no attention by Democrats across all races in 2014. Eight issues received at least 5% of the issue mentions by one set of sponsors.

For Republicans, top candidate mentions were jobs, Obamacare, immigration, and the budget/debt. For the party, it was the economic stimulus (from 2009), budget/debt, taxes, Medicare, and terrorism. For pro-GOP groups, it was Obamacare, jobs, Medicare, and guns. Figure 3 appears to show a bit more separation between the party committee and Republican candidates than for the Democrats. Eleven different issues received 5% of the issue mentions by at least one of the three pro-Republican sponsors.

The estimation of issue convergence is straightforward given the display in Figure 3. For each media market in each race, I sum the absolute differences across all issue areas between candidates (across parties), candidates and groups (within party), and candidates and the party committee (within party). I divide the summed difference by the total candidate and interest group proportions. The resulting number is the percentage of issue *divergence*. I subtract that from 1 to obtain an issue *convergence* score.¹⁴ The measure amounts, in brief, to the percentage of issue mentions that overlap. A little overlap here on Issue X and a little overlap there on Issue Y gets added together, and summed across all issues.

To demonstrate the effect a bit more clearly (and in a different context), Figure A1 in the Supplemental Material reshapes the data to be at the level of the media market and issue for the presidential election in 2012 and for the Senate elections

¹⁴ One limitation in the analysis is that the convergence calculations are limited to only the 60 or so issues laid out in the Supplemental Material. Coders were allowed to enter as text additional issues as “others noted,” but I did not include those entries as part of the issue universe. Hence, in a case where the DSCC mentions health care (a tracked issue) and port security (not tracked), but the Democratic candidate mentions only health care, the convergence score is calculated to be 1. This is likely not a huge issue, though. Although there is a wide range of “other” mentions (28% of the Senate airings in 2014 for this analysis were coded as having an “other” mention), many of these issues, such as gas prices, end up being coded also as “energy policy,” which is on the larger set of tracked issues. Hard figures are not yet available, as the analysis is ongoing, but it appears coders sometimes did not also check the related tracked issue. For example, 18 unique Senate ads were coded as mentioning “outsourcing” in 2014. Fifteen of those were also coded as mentioning “jobs (a tracked issue)”. Eleven ads were mentioned as appealing to “border security” or a “border fence,” of which only six were coded also as an immigration mention.

in 2014. The x-axis in all four graphs shows the proportion of issue mentions from Democratic and Republican candidates in each media market on the 60 issues used by coders. The y-axis shows the proportion of issue mentions on the same issue in that market by allied outside groups in the presidential context and by the party committees in the Senate. The graph demonstrates a much tighter fit for Republicans in 2012, with an R-squared of nearly 0.66 on issue mentions between Romney and groups. For Democrats, there are lots of issues given very little attention by Obama (about 10% of issue mentions in a market) but a great deal of attention (50% or more) by supporting outside groups. In the Senate 2014 context, the relationship is far weaker, and much more scattered across issues and markets. Indeed, for Senate Republicans, candidate issue attention and group issue attention is barely related at all.

It is important to remember and reiterate that the convergence estimation not only favors issue overlap writ large, but proportionate issue overlap. A perfect level of issue convergence will mean candidates and either parties or outside groups devote the same proportionate attention to each of the same issues. Moreover, the issue comparisons range from the broad (e.g., jobs) to the very specific (BP Oil Spill). One could alternatively collapse issue areas into much broader categories (for example, economic policy, social issues, law and order, social welfare, foreign policy) and compare across these aggregations. Issue convergence would be far higher, but it would also fail to capture variation within. There are always trade-offs.

One weakness in the measurement is that it does not consider any issue framing within the ad. All of the scholarship on issue convergence acknowledges this. Republicans may discuss Medicare as a government program better converted into a voucher, for example; Democrats may emphasize the program as a successful entitlement that should be expanded, not changed. As Lipsitz (2013) notes, counting the discussion of Medicare in this regard is not really dialogue, since both sides may simply be asserting different arguments, not necessarily engaging the other side on the merits. This is especially a problem when the issue codes are not so specific – for example, taxes, jobs, or China. Still, when sponsors focus on similar issues, even when they frame them differently, it tells us something important about the basis of a campaign. It could be a campaign about taxes, or the budget, or health care (assuming a high convergence score); or it could be a campaign about dozens of issues raised or discussed at different rates by a multitude of different sponsors.

One final point on measurement: I did not assess convergence at the group-level, choosing instead to collapse all groups advocating for a candidate in a Senate race or media market in a presidential contest. There were dozens of active groups across years, and a fruitful analysis might consider group-level factors

associated with higher or lower convergence scores. Are establishment Republican groups – i.e., Crossroads GPS – more likely to converge with Republican candidates than Tea Party groups? Are candidate-specific super PACs run by former candidate staffers more likely to converge than 501c4 non-profit groups? These are all fruitful questions, but I leave them to future work.

Rates of Issue Convergence

What are the levels of issue convergence in the covered election cycles? I present summary statistics in Figure 4 for the Senate and presidential contexts. There is a lot of data summarized here. Each line in the figure collapses across the sponsor pairings in each media market. (The box covers the range between the 25th and 75th percentile, and the plotted point is the median value in the market.) For Senate, I combine the 2008–2012 campaigns (n=309 state/markets) and compare them to 2014 (n=108). For the presidential, I look at each election separately. Two broad points stand out. First, with a few exceptions, convergence rates are higher in the presidential context than in the Senate.¹⁵ Obama and Romney converge in the median market at about 0.40, and this is higher than the median candidate convergence in the Senate context. In Senate races, for example, the Democratic and Republican candidates have a median issue convergence score of 0.31 between 2008 and 2012, and 0.26 in 2014.

The overlap between Romney and allied groups in 2012 is particularly noteworthy (we saw the raw material for this in Figure A1), with a median score across markets above 0.6. During the heat of the 2012 campaign, *The New York Times* noted that pro-Romney groups were sharing “polling data and focus group research to develop many of the same lines of attack. *And they are being careful to keep their efforts consistent with the themes being emphasized by Mitt Romney’s campaign*” (emphasis added).¹⁶ The same high rates of convergence are also present for the Republican Party efforts on behalf of McCain and Romney, with a

¹⁵ The presidential context is much more varied. However, I do not think this is very important. The very low convergence scores for the DNC/Obama pairing in 2008 are not really worth scrutiny. The party only aired 1570 ads in the fall campaign to Obama’s 305,000. The investment by GOP groups on behalf of McCain was also small, 10,800 ads to McCain’s 154,000. For these groups, their primary focus was defense, abortion, and the Supreme Court. This accounted for nearly half of group issue mentions. McCain devoted just 5% of mentions to those issues.

¹⁶ Jeremy Peters. “Conservative ‘Super PACs’ Synchronize Their Messages,” 9/24/12, *The New York Times*.

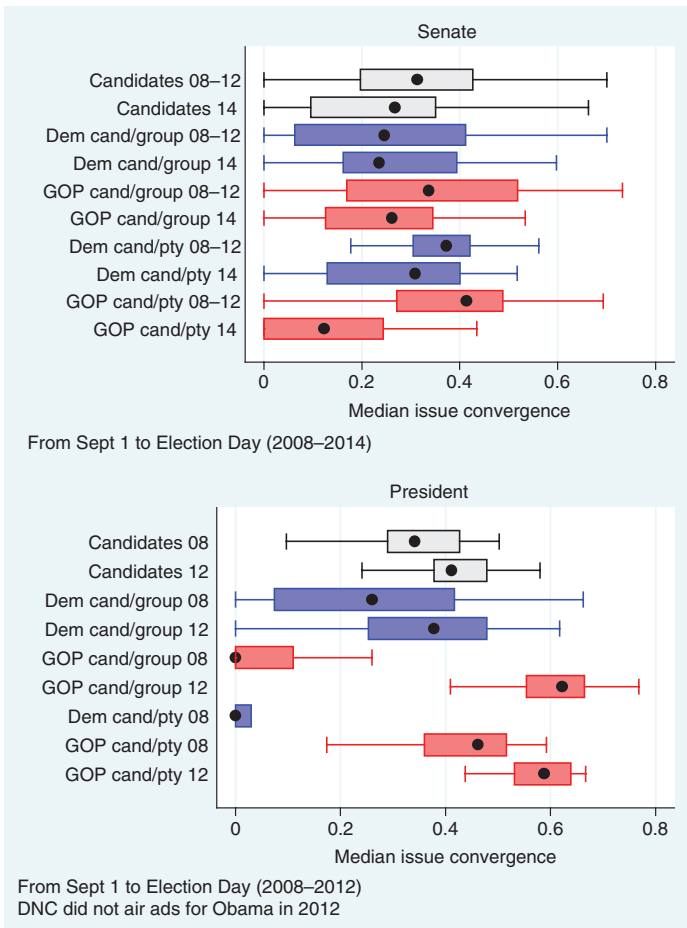


Figure 4

median score of 0.6 in the latter case. The Republican message sync in the 2012 presidential is quite striking, in fact.

A second major inference from Figure 4 is a uniform decline in Senate convergence scores in 2014. Candidate convergence was lower, as was party and group convergence in both parties. (Notably, all of the declines – excepting Democratic group convergence – are statistically significant when comparing each measure’s mean.) This is interesting for two reasons. For one, presidential convergence scores go up between 2008 and 2012, a change one might expect if message coordination was seen as increasingly important. On its face, this seemed part of the

narrative of 2014 as well. A lot of commentary focused on the “brazen” communication between candidates and group allies, for example, with talk of shared ad footage, scripts, and polling data, all done ostensibly within (but skirting close to) the limits of the law.¹⁷ Of course, message coordination need not mean issue convergence, especially if a division of labor (on issue coverage) is the goal. Whether convergence or divergence is the objective, what remains puzzling is the evidence for more *and then less* convergence in two concurrent election cycles.¹⁸

Before turning to the convergence/election outcome link, it is important to consider a few more descriptive trends in the data. Convergence scores are estimated without reference to ad totals in the media market. Recall from Figure 3, scores are based alone on proportionate mentions of issues across sponsors. But how do ad counts vary with issue convergence? Are higher scores a function of lower ad buys by groups? Or vice versa. Figure 5 shows this for the Senate context, and Figure 6 does it for the presidential years. Each point is a media market, and I fit the eight total plots with a lowess curve.

On balance, the figures suggest that higher ad totals produce higher rates of convergence, though most of the graphs appear to plateau. In the Senate context, media markets in 2014 are plotted as a shade darker than earlier cycles. The slightly lower convergence scores in 2014 are most readily apparent for Republicans. The cluster of markets for Republican Party ads is lower than the cluster of markets in 2008–2012. And for pro-GOP groups, convergence drops to between 0.2 and 0.4 for the high end of ads in the top right panel of Figure 5, in turn pulling down the smoothed fit.

Still, the larger message in both figures is a slight positive link between ad totals and convergence. This is not without some consequence. It is, in fact, not obvious that higher ad totals will bring higher rates of convergence. It is true that more ads creates a higher chance that some issues will touch on what candidates address, but because convergence is premised on proportionate overlap, simply spending some resources on more issues will not automatically bring higher convergence. A collection of groups committing ads to 15 issues, for example, will not be more convergent with a candidate devoting disproportionate attention to a handful of other issues.

¹⁷ “They’re Not Allowed to Talk. But Candidates and PACs are Brazenly Communicating All the Time,” by Alex Roarty and Shane Goldmacher. 10/30/14. *National Journal*.

¹⁸ One answer could be differences between the context of presidential and Senate elections. Senate elections, and the messages offered by Senate candidates, may be more of a moving target than the two party nominees in the presidential case. And there are more groups scattered across the collection of Senate races. Still, at least one would expect perhaps modest increases in issue convergence in 2014 if message coordination really was a driving goal of political allies.

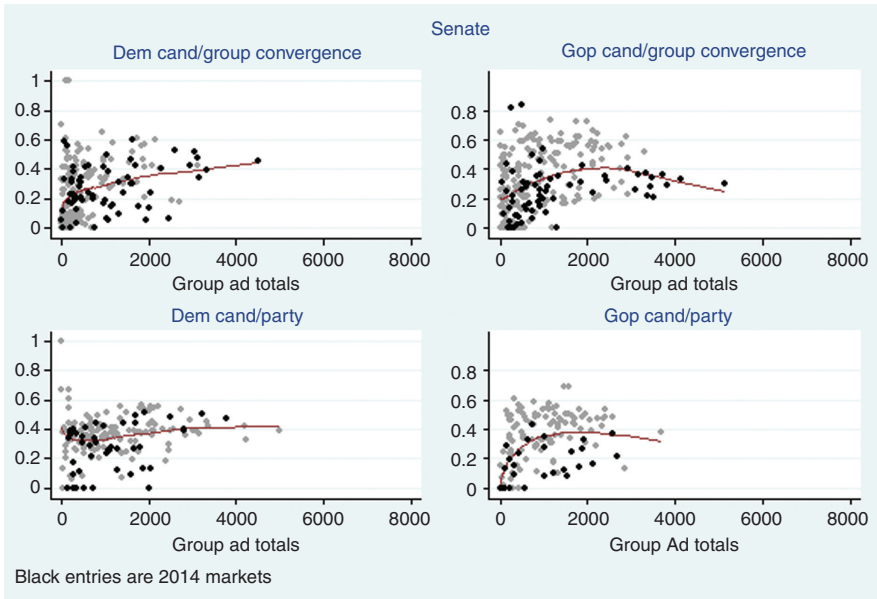


Figure 5

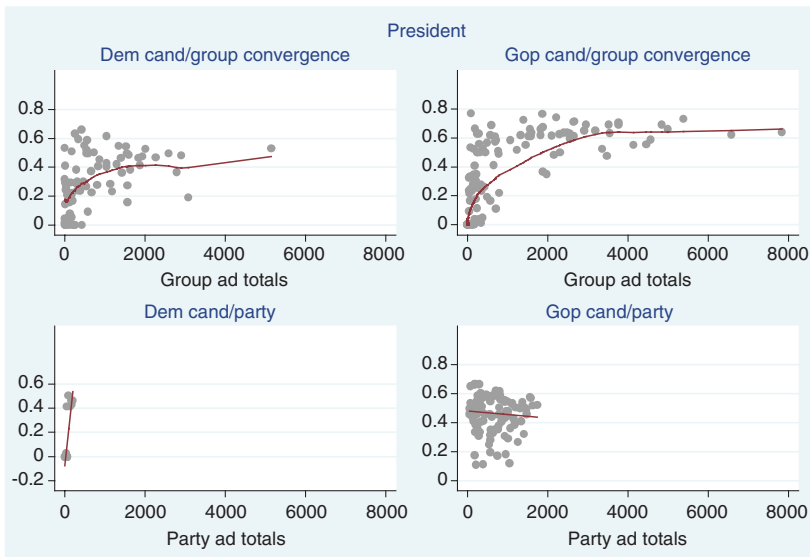


Figure 6

Consider an example. In the Iowa Senate race in 2014, pro-Bruce Braley groups aired over 3000 ads in the Des Moines market in the fall campaign. They actually out-advertised Braley, who aired only 1947 ads. The groups focused on 14 separate issues in their ads, of which Braley also advertised on 10, though he also advertised on five additional issues ignored by the groups (meaning 10 of 19 total issues were mutually addressed). The largest overlap in their proportionate attention was on Social Security, where Braley committed 20% of issue mentions to the groups' 19%. Seven percent of Braley's mentions were on taxes, as were his allied groups. Notably, 25% of group issue mentions were on abortion, which accounted for only 5% of Braley's issues. The resulting convergence score in the market was 0.52.

Compare this to the Democratic Party efforts on behalf of incumbent Senator Mark Begich in the Anchorage market in Alaska. The DSCC (Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee) sponsored 2000 ads in the market, focusing their efforts on abortion (27% of issue mentions), women's health (37%), and Social Security (18%), among a few others. Begich focused on none of these in favor of 15 other issues, including taxes (27%), crime (10%), and government ethics (10%).¹⁹ Convergence was 0.

Another way to think about this is the relationship between Democratic and Republican candidate convergence and the convergence within parties among allies. That is, if the candidates engage *each other* on a set of issues, how do groups and parties respond? This is demonstrated in Figures 7 and 8, which shows candidate convergence on the x-axis for Senate and presidential elections.

Here too, the evidence points to a positive relationship. For Senate races, both Democratic group convergence and Republican Party convergence show something of a linear fit (the former more so than the latter). GOP group convergence seems to peak with moderate candidate convergence, though, and the Democratic Party seems unaffected by candidate dialogue. In the presidential case, excepting the meager ad buys of the DNC, all of the plots point to a strong relationship between candidate convergence and within-party convergence.

¹⁹ There is nothing in this analysis that can discern whether outside groups, parties, or candidates "drive" the issue discussion. The analysis here collapses across all weeks in the fall campaign, preventing a temporal analysis. But still, one may ask, who is setting the agenda? Candidate convergence is not necessarily driving group or party convergence, for example. It is just as likely to work in the other direction. And it is probably more likely that larger factors – the state of the economy, state-level forces, scandal, etc – are bringing certain issues to the table in a campaign or media market. Uncovering a casual story has many challenges, but it is not the focus of this paper, which is more modestly about trends in convergence and effects on election results.

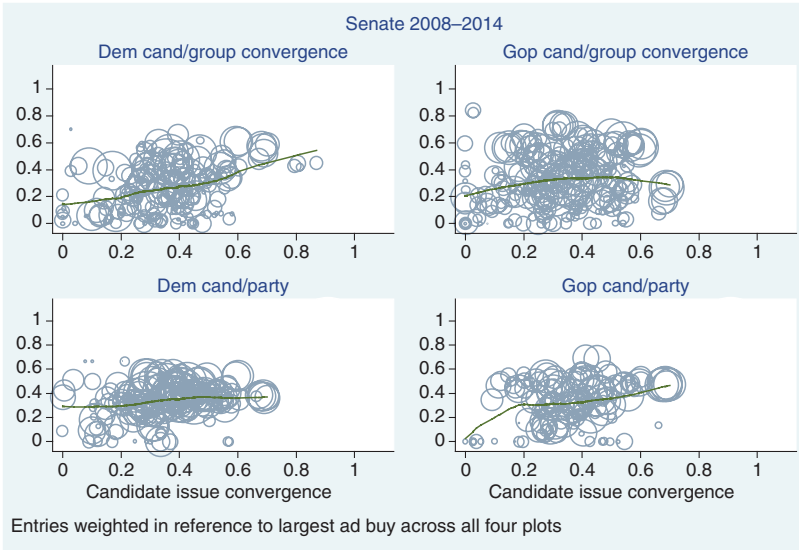


Figure 7

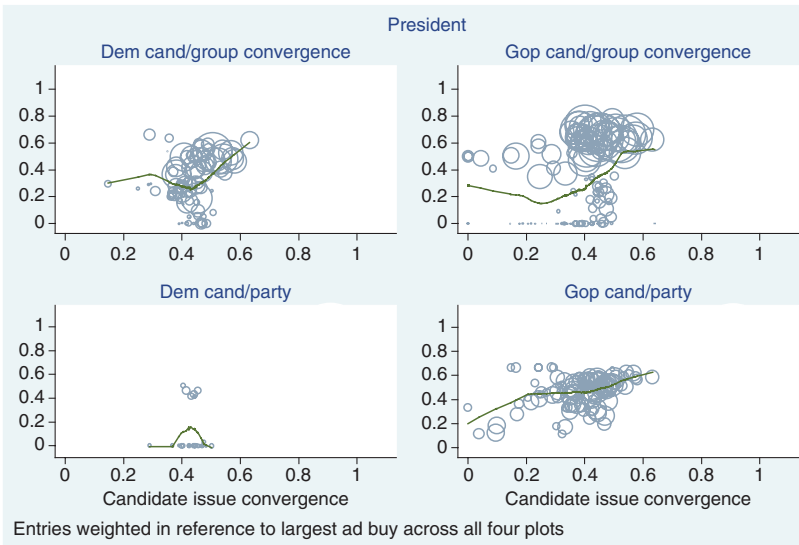


Figure 8

These results suggest something important. As the candidates talk jointly – and at similar rates – about issues, the supporting players do so as well.²⁰

It is important not to overstate things, however. Convergence rates rarely exceed 0.6 (and are often far lower), implying that there is a considerable range of issue attention by sponsors. Sometimes candidates talk about issues that groups and parties do not; sometimes it is the other way around; sometimes all of the sponsors at least make note of the issue but give it a considerably different amount of attention. A more blunt assessment of this is to consider a count of the issues raised by groups (or parties) in a state/market. An issue jointly advertised by candidates and the party or group is assigned a 1. An issue raised only by the party or group is assigned –1. A summed count across issues will indicate whether the balance of issues by non-candidates are “new” ones.

If the key concern is whether outside groups can hijack the issue agenda of a campaign, this measurement is potentially enlightening. There are a number of examples in the data, in fact, where issue convergence of 0.3 or 0.4 (close to the mean across all of the comparisons) still produces a net issue count on this alternative measure that is below 0. The importance of this depends on whether the key concern is the comparison of issue proportions (as with the convergence measure) or just the count of overlapping issues. Even if the former is more compelling, it is important to keep in mind that issue convergence scores of 0.5 or 0.6 (which tend to be on the high end of what we observe) do not mean that interest groups and/or parties are in lock step with their allies on the issues offered to voters. A handful (or more) of additional issues can be introduced to voters even under relatively high rates of issue convergence.

Effects of Issue Convergence

Does any of this matter on Election Day, however? That is, are levels of issue convergence between candidates and supporters related to the number of votes a candidate receives?

At the outset, it is important to note the challenges of answering this question. Election outcomes are driven by a lot of factors, and campaign effects specifically are not in general large, especially in races toward the top of the ticket. Moreover,

²⁰ This is not exact, of course. The within-party convergence scores for group and party committees do not measure whether the convergence is on the same issues for which the candidates are dialoging.

estimation is a challenge. If one estimates a model that looks for ad effects generally, the collection of ads in a market usually suffices. There is some debate in the literature about the duration of ad effects (Gerber et al. 2011), but most scholars either lump all ads together, or make high-level distinctions between negative or positive ads. The interest here is actually somewhat interactive. How are ad buys effective specifically when they converge on a set of issues? It is a matter of quantity *and* issue content.

For the moment, that interaction will be generally ignored. Table 1 looks first at the simple bivariate correlation (weighted by group or party ad counts) between issue convergence and Democratic vote at the county-level.²¹ I do this in part because of the challenge of controlling for other levels of issue convergence. A model that includes Democratic group and party convergence scores, for example, will only include cases where groups and parties both advertised in the market. This ignores some of the relevant data. Table 1 amounts, then, to a reconnaissance of the relationships.

The results are surprising. Fifteen correlations are significantly different from 0 (of 22 comparisons), but only seven of them are in the expected direction. Eight effects, in fact, suggest that as candidates converge with their allies they perform

Table 1 Bi-variate Correlations Between Issue Convergence and County-level Vote.

Convergence	Senate Democratic Percent				Obama Percent	
	(2-party vote)				(2-party vote)	
	2008	2010	2012	2014	2008	2012
Dem candidate/group	0.007	0.125*	0.207*	-0.082*	-0.068*	-0.022
Dem cand/party	-0.015	-0.113*	0.080*	-0.072*	0.198*	
GOP candidate/group	-0.057	-0.086*	-0.090*	0.076+	0.026	-0.073*
GOP cand/party	-0.020	0.172*	0.189*	-0.022	0.088*	0.047

Note: Weighted by party or group ad counts.

Bolded entries are in the expected direction.

+p<0.10; *p<0.05.

²¹ It matters little if one measures county-level vote as the difference between Democratic and Republican votes, or in the presidential case if the outcome is difference in vote from the previous election. As of this writing, the 2014 county election results are subject to minor change as vote totals are updated in some places. This is unlikely to have any meaningful impact on the results reported below.

worse on Election Day. We find an effect of this sort in the 2010, 2012, and 2014 Senate, and in the presidential election of 2008.

What do these relationships look like? Figure 9 plots two of the largest effects: Democratic group convergence in the 2012 Senate (a predicted sign) and NRSC (National Republican Senatorial Committee) convergence in the same year (which had an opposite signed effect). The graphs fit a linear line to county vote on convergence. For Democratic groups, the plot is all over, and the fitted line suggests only the meekest of electoral benefits. For Republicans, the plotted effect is entirely driven by a cluster of outlying cases on the lower left. (This is the Maine Senate election, where Independent Angus King won a resounding victory, and the Democratic nominee came in a distant third.) The dashed line excludes these cases and uncovers an effect in the right direction.

Figure 10 plots four additional effects from the Senate elections of 2014. In all four panels, the effect is incredibly tiny, and in the case of Democratic groups (the top left panel), it also appears driven by the markets at the upper and lower bounds of issue convergence.²² The relationship of convergence to vote totals is otherwise zero.

What is going on here to produce these relationships? One might surmise that the wrongly signed effects are endogenous, in that groups/parties and candidates work to converge on a set of issues in the places where they expect to underperform. This does not really seem all that convincing, however, partly because some of the effects work in the expected direction. Nor is the election, party, or sponsor a likely culprit. The direction of effects is scattered across all of these categories. It seems more likely that a series of controls are important to isolating the impact of convergence. But this, too, adds little clarity. Adding controls for incumbency, competitiveness, and spending (or ad volume) does not eliminate many of the effects demonstrated in Table 1, and almost

²² For comparison (and not shown here, but available on request), I estimated county-level models of vote share in the 2008–2014 Senate races using Democratic and Republican ad totals as the primary causal variables. I controlled for a host of other factors, including incumbency, candidate spending, socio-demographics, and median income. In all four models, Democratic and Republican ad totals were significantly related to Democratic two-party vote share, and in the expected direction. The magnitudes of the effects were also notable. One thousand additional ads tended to produce between 1 and 3.5 more percentage points, depending on the year. There are clear endogeneity concerns in such models, but the evidence here would suggest that ad totals more broadly are quite important in measuring campaign effects, at least in comparison to the purchase gained of focusing on issue convergence more specifically.

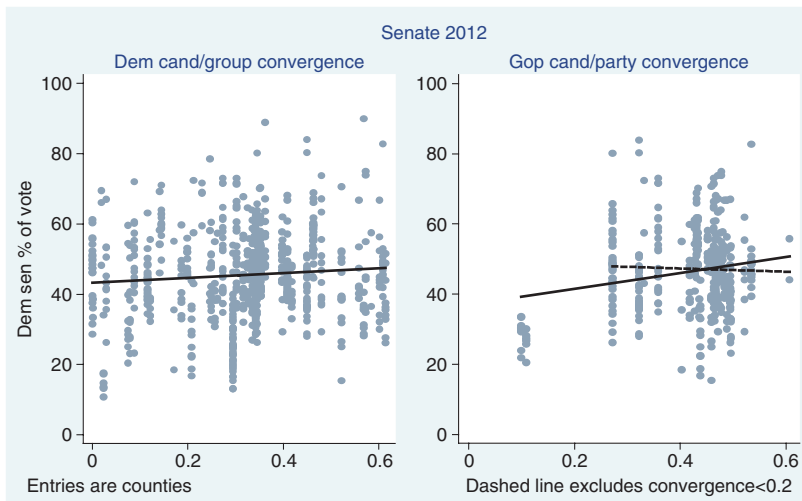


Figure 9

never reverses the sign.²³ The most common outcome is to reduce the effect to insignificance.

To be sure, a more rigorous modeling strategy would be ideal. But the product is unlikely to produce an effect that will imply much of substance. Why? For one, Table 1 and Figures 9 and 10 imply that any effect, across the full range of issue convergence, is very small. Small effects are meaningful in close races, especially if the production of a small effect is as “easy” as buying another 1000 ads in a media market. A small effect from a significant investment in higher issue convergence seems unproductive, however. The effort it would take to coordinate a message strategy with allied groups whom one is not legally allowed to coordinate (with either publicly broadcast issue strategies that one hopes is adopted by super PACs or party committees, or surreptitious communications in violation of the law) does not seem worth the effort. It seems so specifically in the face of the more convincing evidence that ad volume alone is far more consistently related to changes in vote share.

²³ The number of models for this point is large. To avoid losing cases, I estimated models of Democratic vote as a function of convergence (and controls), adding only one measure (e.g., Democratic candidate/group) at a time. This produces four models in each year (for a total of 23 Senate and presidential models). In truth, though, the correct model specification is not clear, meaning a number of varied models in each case are important to be more confident that the effect of convergence is stable.

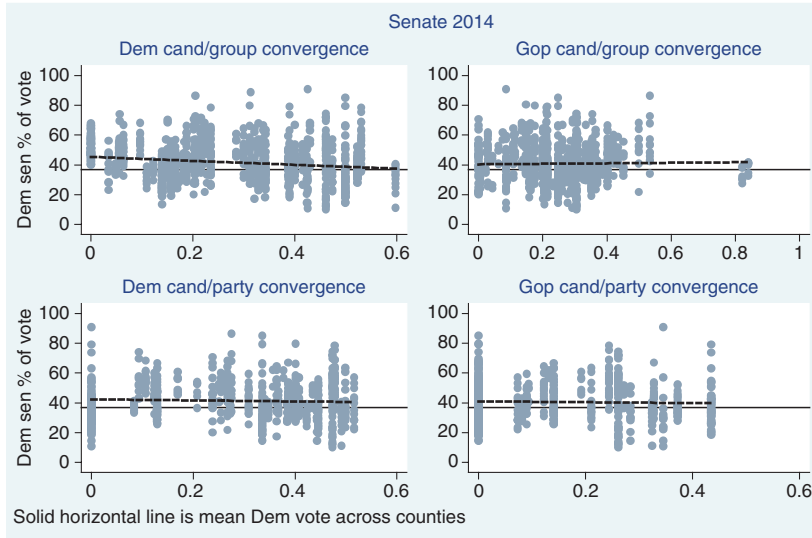


Figure 10

This sort of argument has a lot of important implications. If convergence *had* uncovered higher vote totals, it would clearly incentivize groups to work around coordination bans. That is, the results would encourage the players in elections to work towards issue coordination. Mitt Romney and his supporters seemed to take this approach most clearly, as median issue convergence between his campaign and supporting groups was over 0.60 (see again Figure 4). Much work would need to go into replicating this success in elections down-ballot, but if the effort had suggested more persuasion, it might be considered worth it in high profile and highly competitive elections.

At best, however, the results are weak to non-existent. These results, in that sense, could be framed as a positive for the electoral process. The introduction of new groups and new issues into a race is not a boon *only* to the candidate who can best coordinate behind the scene. The groups who enter a race and introduce a set of issues (sometimes vexing the candidate they seek to promote) do not end up hurting that candidate, on balance. Even as campaigns lose control of the issue agenda (or do not), the effect is meager on vote share.

True, other possibilities exist, like the ones suggested by Lipsitz – issue convergence from supporting players may help candidates obfuscate. They may also complicate the candidate’s attempts to send clear signals on issue positions. The effects of issue convergence among allies on these measures are not yet known. But as for the concern that more voices can damage the attempts of

candidates to offer voters a clear and unambiguous “choice,” there is little here to be worried about. Perhaps like Sides (2007), one may see this as evidence for minimal effects in campaigns. Yes, ads may work on the margins, as this paper and prior scholarship has demonstrated, but what is in those ads may matter even less.

Conclusion

There are many caveats to this analysis. For one, the measurement itself is agnostic on the number of issues raised by the ad sponsors. Convergence is measured as 1 if a group and candidate focus all of their efforts on only one issue. It is also 1 if these sponsors touch on 20 issues, each with 5% of the mentions. It might be the case that convergence under conditions of fewer issue mentions (that is, a tightly conveyed campaign agenda) might bring stronger effects than a more diffuse case of convergence.

This paper also avoids measuring convergence on subsets of issues. Sides (2007) and Kaplan, Park, and Ridout (2006) split issues into owned and salient issue subsets. This might be particularly important for the analysis in this paper. Do partisan allies converge more on owned issues? Does such convergence (Democrats on social welfare; Republicans on taxes and foreign policy) lead to strong electoral performance? Sides (2007) asks these very questions on candidate issue mentions, but the analysis could easily be extended to the broad array of party and outside spending.

And yet despite these caveats, we can draw some important inferences. For one, convergence is quite variable across races and sponsors. Republicans seem a bit better at this than Democrats, and party committees appear to out-perform groups. Second, convergence seems strongest in the places where ads are abundant and candidates are engaged with one another. There is a lot of issue overlap, then, in some of the most competitive elections. As with Kaplan, Park, and Ridout (2006), one might put some stock in the notion that these races encourage issue engagement.

Finally, the results suggest that while issue convergence might comport with expectations of a deliberative electoral environment, it does not bring with it stronger electoral success. There is just not a lot of evidence that such proportionate issue attention has more persuasive appeal than a broad and scattered issue collection. Sides (2007) argues that candidates are free to pursue whatever issue agenda they might think is successful. These results add to that. Candidates need not look over their shoulders at what supporting allies are saying; groups need not scour candidate statements for clues about ad strategies or preferred issue

messages; consultants need not flout coordination bans or share data and polling with other allied groups to coordinate a message or attack. Such strategies make sense on the surface. They may be an active part about what groups are hoping to accomplish in future elections. The data offered here, however, suggest such work is more bluster than an electoral bang-for-the-buck.

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