

“Loose Cannons or Loyal Foot Soldiers?” Interest Group Issue Convergence in U.S. Senate Races

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Abstract

There is a growing literature on the issue overlap of Democratic and Republican candidates in campaigns. Scholars investigate the extent to which candidates talk about the same set of issues, and whether the stakes of the election or the types of issues on the agenda affect such overlap. Less is known, however, on when and how often pro-Democratic and pro-Republican interest groups converge on issue discussion with their candidate and party allies. Are interest groups truly independent in what they talk about in campaigns, or do they follow the cues of candidates and parties? This paper explores the level of issue overlap in political ads between Democratic candidates, parties, and interest groups, and between Republican candidates, parties, and interest groups in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 Senate campaigns. Using a comprehensive dataset of all political ads aired between 2000 and 2004, I show that interest group issue overlap is dependent on the campaign’s negativity, the type of election, and the issue convergence between the two major candidates. In general, the evidence indicates that interest groups are not “loose cannons” but “loyal foot soldiers” who shape the content of their public communications to reflect the content of the campaign as waged by the candidates and formal party organizations.

1 Introduction

In the final week of the 2000 Senate elections, candidates, parties, and interest groups sponsored just over 25,000 television ads. Candidates aired the bulk of those ads (18,500), but formal party organizations sponsored nearly 5,000 and interest groups aired over 1,600. The Chamber of Commerce, for example, bought 370 spots attacking Debbie Stabenow in Michigan. Americans for Job Security sponsored over 200 ads attacking Maria Cantwell in Washington, and the National Rifle Association broadcast nearly 100 ads in defense of Virginia Senate candidate, George Allen.

In 2002, candidates, party organizations, and interest groups aired over 41,000 spots in the final week of the election.¹ As with 2000, candidates were responsible for the majority (65 percent), but parties aired 11,000 spots (27 percent) and interest groups sponsored over 3,000 (7.7 percent). In this cycle, the AFL-CIO aired 309 ads in the final week (attacking Republican Senate candidates in Colorado and Missouri); Club for Growth sponsored 344 (spreading their resources across five Senate campaigns); the National Education Association sponsored 166 (entirely on behalf of Jean Carnahan in Missouri); and Americans for Job Security aired over 800 (for Senate candidates in Colorado, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Texas).

And in 2004, the final week of the campaign saw nearly 48,000 spots, with candidates again accounting for over two-thirds. But formal party organizations bought 21 percent of these final week ads (nearly 10,000), and interest groups accounted for nearly 8 percent (3,700 ads). In this cycle, the Club for Growth bought 643 spots in the final seven days to aid their preferred candidates in Oklahoma and South Carolina; the League of Conservation voters sponsored over 160 ads on behalf of Democrat Erskine Bowles in North Carolina; the NRA attacked Mel Martinez in Florida with 100 spots and defended Republican Richard Burr against Bowles with

over 150 spots; finally, Citizens for a Strong Senate (a Section 527 group) sponsored over 2,400 ads for candidates in five Senate races.

In airing these ads across these three election cycles, interest groups spent millions; and they spent millions more for various House candidates and for presidential candidates George Bush, Al Gore, and John Kerry. Such investments have drawn the ire of campaign reform advocates. In the 2000 and 2002 campaigns, it was issue advocacy ads that angered many (Magleby 2001a, Magleby 2001b). These were party and interest group-sponsored ads that went unregulated by campaign finance laws because they avoided certain express advocacy words, known as “magic words.” More recently, in the 2004 and 2006 elections, it was the proliferation of 527s that seemed to undermine the spirit of campaign finance reform (Skinner 2005, Weissman and Hassan 2005). All told, many complain that interest group candidate advocacy, especially on television and often outside the reach of federal campaign finance laws, represents an inappropriate intrusion into American elections.

Such claims are well-documented. And arguments on either side of the divide are clear. But a number of questions remain unanswered. When interest groups air ads on behalf of certain candidates, often going on the attack for their preferred candidate, *what are they saying?* Are interest groups focused on a set of issues that diverge from what the two candidates and their party organizations are talking about? Or are they bolstering that issue dialogue? Much of the debate over interest group electioneering revolves around the limits of free speech rights (Smith, 2001). But we know almost nothing about the content of the speech, and how interest groups’ issue concerns tie into the issue debates between candidates and formal party organizations. This is the focus of the chapter.

The analysis offered here ties into a developing literature on issue convergence (also

called issue dialogue) between Democratic and Republican candidates in campaigns, a term operationalized as the level of joint discussion on an issue or set of issues. Scholars have found a relatively high degree of issue convergence (Sigelman and Buel 2004, Simon 2002), often predicated on the stakes of the election or the types of issues on the agenda (Kaplan, Ridout and Park 2006). A key motivation in this scholarship is the prediction from issue ownership theory (which assumes that each party is advantaged on a set of issues) that candidates should avoid discussion of issues owned by the other party (Budge and Fairlie 1983, Petrocik 1996, Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003). This expectation is bemoaned by participatory democrats, who worry that American elections are characterized by candidates talking past each other. The scholarship has focused solely on the electioneering of candidates, choosing to ignore the advocacy of formal party organizations and pro-candidate interest groups. This makes some sense, however, given that interest group campaigning accounts for only about 10 percent of pro-candidate messages in a campaign (depending on whether the campaign is for House, Senate, or President).

In the realm of issue convergence, it seems apparent that while issue ownership expects candidates to diverge on issues, it might expect issue convergence between candidates, formal party organizations, and their interest group allies. After all, if parties “own” a set of issues, wouldn’t interest groups choose to bolster candidates on the issues that will deliver the most votes? Of course, this is not obviously true. While interest groups are likely rational actors seeking to spend money with the highest efficiency, entrepreneurs are not allowed to coordinate messages with candidate allies. Might group leaders make a different judgment as to what issues get considered? This is the underlying question of this chapter. Do interest groups act “as if” they were candidates, converging with candidate allies? Or are they loose cannons, who either never match candidates, or do so in situations candidates might regret (when groups go negative, for

example)?

In addition to contributing to the growing literature on issue convergence, the chapter also speaks to the literature on party networks. As formal party organizations have transitioned into “parties-in-service” (Aldrich, 1995), candidate, party, and interest group leaders have learned to collaborate on common goals. This compels a broader view of political party that encompasses more than the formal party organization. Indeed, much of the scholarship in this area focuses on how this affects not only the way we conceptualize a “political party” but how we understand its role in American politics (Schlesinger, 1985, Cohen et al, forthcoming). In addition, the place of interest groups in the party network is amplified in a political context where control of Congress is a perennial campaign issue (Rozell and Wilcox, 1999; Skinner, 2006). With the House, Senate, and the presidency often hanging in the balance (especially after the elections of 1994), many interest groups have even deeper incentives to choose a side and enter a party network. After all, many active interest groups already have a liberal or conservative perspective. In a polarized political environment, groups can either hedge their bets on who will win majority control—often by donating to both sides or by remaining on the sidelines—or they can judge the potential policy rewards of helping a party assume or retain majority status (Malbin et al, 2002). For many interest groups, the chance to be part of a party network conjures images of very cozy relationships with House and Senate committee chairs. What role do interest group leaders play in the network, however? How does the relationship between allies play out, especially with campaign finance rules that place limits on explicit coordination between interest groups and parties/candidates? This chapter helps answer some of these questions.

The chapter is organized as follows. I begin with a discussion of what we should expect

from interest groups in terms of issues discussed in their political ads. I follow this with a brief explanation of how I measure issue overlap between interest groups and their favored candidates, and the variables that I expect to drive higher levels of issue convergence. I focus on interest group-candidate convergence for each week of the 2000, 2002, and 2004 Senate campaigns, allowing me to disaggregate interest group advertising strategies and to account for changes within the campaign (of which there is very little research on interest groups).² I also make use of Wisconsin Advertising Project data on political advertisements in the top media markets, which is an invaluable source of information on the campaign issue environment. In the final section, I report the results of a number of models that predict the degree of issue convergence at the level of the campaign-week. As we will see, the results show that interest groups are quite purposeful political actors, acting “as if” they were candidates.

2 What to Expect in the Study of Interest Group Issue Convergence

As made clear at the beginning of the chapter, interest groups have become relevant players in the ad war, often sponsoring television commercials that bolster preferred candidates and attack opposing candidates. Table 1 lists the interest groups active in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 Senate races. In no instance did an interest group air ads supporting candidates from both parties. While thousands of Political Action Committees (known as PACs) often support *both* Democrats and Republicans with their small, limited hard money contributions (and there is an extensive literature in political science predicting the pattern of these hard money contributions—see, for example, Jacobson, 2004), in the high stakes game of television advertising, interest groups who participate pick only one side. As the table shows, a number of interest groups aired thousands of ads in a number of Senate races. Americans for Quality

Nursing Health Care, for example, participated in five Senate contests in 2000, helping only the Republican candidates. The League of Conservation Voters helped four Senate Democrats in 2000. Americans for Job Security bought air time for five Senate Republicans in 2002, and the Sierra Club used resources to air ads for nine Democrats that year.

[Table 1 about here]

While such participation is not insignificant, we should keep these numbers in context. As Table 2 demonstrates, interest group advertising (between 12,000 and 14,000 ads in the 2000, 2002, and 2004 Senate races) accounts for only about 5-7 percent of Senate ads in these three years. Formal party organizations and candidates account for a substantial majority of the ad war. As we will see, however, interest groups focus their ad buys in highly competitive contexts, so that in some races, their advertising levels nearly matched candidates.³ For example, in the 2002 Colorado Senate race, groups aired 22 percent of all campaign ads; in the 2000 Michigan race, groups accounted for 17 percent of all airings; in the 2000 Missouri race it was 11.4 percent, and in a number of other races, that number approached 10 percent.⁴

[Table 2 about here]

There has been little empirical investigation of what issues interest groups focus on in their political advertising. At the outset, it makes sense to assume that interest groups focus on their principal issue area (i.e., the Sierra Club should air ads on the environment). We might expect, then, that there is little issue overlap with the candidates they seek to help, unless these groups self-select into races where their issue is being considered. Indeed, in debates over the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), opponents of reform asserted that political ads sponsored by interest groups were unconnected or unconcerned with what voters do in the ballot box or what candidates do on the campaign trail. According to Denise Mitchell, former Special

Assistant for Public Affairs at the AFL-CIO:⁵

I realize that AFL-CIO advertising could affect how citizens vote. If our advertisements succeed in educating the public about working families issues, and influence the actions, votes, positions and policy commitments of legislators and candidates, they may in some cases have an indirect effect on election outcomes, just as virtually every legislative and other activity undertaken by the AFL-CIO on behalf of workers that is conveyed to the public may have such an effect. This, however, has never been the point of our broadcast advertising program, within or outside the 30- and 60-day periods.

A potential challenge to this, however, is that interest groups appear motivated by the competitiveness of the race (Goldstein and Freeman 2002), with the presumption that the exigencies of the electoral context will drive the issue focus. Indeed, proponents of campaign finance reform argue that interest group political advertising has the single goal of moving votes on Election Day. According to Tanya Metaksa, former Executive Director of the National Rifle Association's Institute for Legislative Action, "It is foolish to believe there is any practical difference between issue advocacy and advocacy of a political candidate. What separates issue advocacy and political advocacy is a line in the sand drawn on a windy day" (Marcus, 1998). In this sense, we might expect interest group ads to reflect the campaign as waged by the candidates.

The issue convergence and issue ownership literature identify a number of expectations for *candidate* issue convergence. Dialogue should rise in high stimulus campaigns like competitive elections or open seats (which are often competitive). This is derived from median voter theorem, which predicts candidates in competitive races to converge to the center and talk,

at least some of the time, about issues on which the opponent is advantaged (Downs, 1957, Arnold, 1990). Simon (2002), however, offers reasons to expect more *and* less convergence in competitive elections, making a prediction in this regard a bit more complicated. Dialogue is also expected to be high in smaller states (where it is harder to avoid the issue focus of the opposition) and in negative campaigns (where one candidate might compel the opposition to respond by baiting them with attacks) (Kaplan, Park, and Ridout, 2003). Finally, dialogue should also rise around “salient” and “consensual” issues (where both sides have incentives to talk; or where there are minimal disadvantages in convergence), and should decline around “owned” issues (where one side is disadvantaged) (Petrocik, 1996).

Do interest groups act “as if” they were candidates? In other words, does the theory of issue convergence for candidates also apply to interest groups? After all, they should want their candidate to win, and this might mean approaching the campaign much like a candidate would (perhaps even relying on a similar circle of political consultants). But, on the other hand, interest groups entrepreneurs might be unsophisticated political strategists, out to advance their own issue agenda.

I assert two competing expectations. First, the **loyal foot soldier model** predicts issue convergence with candidates to rise when candidate dialogue is high, when the race is competitive or open, and when the candidates are negative. I expect issue divergence when interest groups go negative. Under this model, interest groups “follow the leader” by spending resources to communicate with voters on the issues candidates are talking about (to bolster that dialogue), and to reinforce the negativity of the candidates. We should also expect candidate issue convergence in different issue areas to predict candidate-group convergence. On issues that favor the Democrats, convergence between Democratic candidates and their interest group

allies should go up. On issues that favor the Republicans, we should expect the same.

In contrast, the **loose cannon model** predicts either no candidate-group issue convergence or convergence under less optimal conditions. In this sense, if convergence rises when interest groups are negative (but not when candidates are), this might indicate that groups are tied directly to candidates when they mudsling, a potentially volatile alliance for candidates with no legal authority to influence interest group message conveyance. The model also predicts that when candidates are focused on a set of issues, interest groups diverge and convey alternative messages.

In this chapter, I'm concerned with the broad interest group issue environment during the course of the campaign. What are viewers seeing from interest groups? Are the messages similar to or different than the messages conveyed by candidates and parties? In other words, I combine all interest groups into one analysis. Additional work on which *types* of groups converge with allied candidates is encouraged, but beyond the scope of this analysis. For example, we might expect multi-issue groups (i.e., Americans for Job Security, Republican Leadership Council, and EMILY's List) to converge with candidates more often than single-issue groups (i.e., League of Conservation Voters, Sierra Club, and NARAL), as the former might have more flexibility in what issues they could discuss. On the other hand, single issue groups might self-select into races where (and when) their issue is salient, implying issue convergence would be highest for them.

3 Measuring Candidate-Group Issue Convergence

I rely on advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. The Ad Project has coded and tracked all political advertisements in the top media markets (top 75 in 2000, and the

top 100 in 2002 and 2004) since the 2000 elections.⁶ The unit of analysis in these data is each airing of all political advertisements. The data record the date and time of each airing, as well as the media market it aired in, and the television network and show it aired during. Coders assessed each unique ad on whether it was positive, negative, or contrasting in tone, and on up to four issue mentions. I make use of the 2000, 2002, and 2004 data. All told, these data contain over three million political ad airings by candidates, formal party organizations, and allied interest groups.⁷

I measure the level of issue convergence between interest groups on the one hand, and their allied candidates and party organizations on the other hand. I combine formal party organizations, candidate and party/candidate coordinated expenditures into one category. I am assuming, at the outset, that candidates and their parties talk often about the same set of issues. This is not obviously true, especially in the era of party soft money, where issue advocacy ads prevented party leaders from coordinating messages with favored candidates. Indeed, there might be reason to expect candidates and their party organizations to focus on different sets of issues (a division of labor, for example). On the other hand, coordinated expenditures between parties and candidates are not trivial (a direct case where issue message is identical); in addition, in the realm of hard money ads, coordinated messages are legal, and may be on the rise post-BCRA (Corrado, 2006, p.32). Therefore, I treat candidate and formal party organization ads as joint actors, and refer to both as “candidate” advertising for the remainder of the chapter.⁸

In addition, I measure issue convergence by week, and only in weeks where both candidates/parties and interest groups are airing ads. I take this approach for two reasons. First, this increases the number of observations (compared to measuring convergence at the level of interest groups for all activity over the course of the campaign). While it is true that interest

group political advertising has been the focus of considerable debate in recent years, it remains that interest group ads make up only a small portion of all advertising in politics (as mentioned earlier in regards to Table 2). Second, interest groups might change their advertising strategy over the course of the campaign. In other words, conditional on joint candidate-group advertising, group entrepreneurs may choose to avoid issue convergence at certain weeks in the campaign (i.e., when their ads are negative); they may also seek to increase issue convergence at other points (i.e., when the candidates are talking about specific sets of issues).

I measure issue convergence in a way similar to recent scholarship. Like Sigelman and Buel (2004), I measure issue convergence directly as the level of issue discussion on the same set of topics. They critique work on issue ownership for its operationalization of issue dialogue (p. 652), arguing that previous work only examines the extent to which candidates talk about certain issues, not the extent to which candidates talk about issues *at the same time or during the same campaign*. Like Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006) I use political ads for Senate contests to measure convergence. In other words, I use the frequency data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project to measure the issue environment and the level of issue engagement by relevant political actors. Previous studies, including Sigelman and Buel (2004), have relied on campaign issue coverage in newspapers.

Because each ad is coded on up to four issue mentions from a list of about thirty, I aggregate the political ad data up to the level of the campaign, week, and sponsor. From this aggregation, I know the proportion of ads aired in each issue area. I assess issue overlap as follows:

$$1 - \sum \{ | I_{iC} - I_{iIG} | / (I_{iC} + I_{iIG}) \}$$

I is the proportion of ads in a given week about an issue area; C is the candidate, and IG are all

interest groups.

[Table 2 here]

Table 2 shows a hypothetical and simplified example of what this conceptualization means, with only five issue areas instead of the approximately thirty used in the actual analysis.⁹ In the example, candidates avoided Issue 1 and focused on all four other issue areas. In contrast, interest groups mentioned Issue 1 in 60 percent of their ads that week, but did not raise Issue 2 in any ad. Because the coding scheme allows any ad to be assigned up to four issue mentions, it is not mandatory that the issue proportions add up to 1. Note that issue focus may overlap partially; imagine one ad about social security and Medicare, and another ad about Medicare and government spending. Medicare overlaps, but the other two do not.

The third row in each example is the absolute difference in proportions. The greater the summed difference (across all issue areas) the less issue overlap. Because ads can have up to four issue mentions, however, and often have less than that (imagine an ad only about social security), the final step re-scales the absolute total difference to account for the number of issue areas covered. Again, in the extreme, if candidates focused all of their ads on four issues (in other words, 100 percent of all their ads in a given week on four issues), the total would 4; if interest groups focused their week's ads on only one issue, that sum would be 1. The total between the two is 5. I divide the summed difference in proportions (third row in the table) by the total candidate and interest group proportions (the fourth row in the table). The resulting number is the percentage of issue *divergence*, so I subtract that from 1, to obtain issue *convergence*.

In Figure 1, I show histograms of issue convergence between Democratic and Republican candidates; between Democratic candidates and their interest group allies; and between

Republican candidates and their allies. The distributions are all skewed right, and there are many more weeks of candidate dialogue than candidate/interest group dialogue. Nonetheless, the mean is fairly comparable across all three contexts, although Democratic candidates and their interest group allies have a slight advantage over Republicans and their allies (0.239 to 0.216).

[Figure 1 about here]

3.1 Independent Variables

What should we expect to drive issue convergence? First, we might consider the nature of the race to be important. I classified each Senate contest on whether it was an open seat or one with a Democratic incumbent (GOP incumbent is the excluded category). Second, I measure the competitiveness of the race, using *Congressional Quarterly's* fall pre-election assessments. They code Senate races on a 4-point scale: safe, favored, leaning, or too-close-to-call. I use this 4-category operationalization, although if I dichotomize into competitive or not (the former being leaning or too-close-to-call), the results do not change. As noted earlier, we might have strong reason to believe that candidates converge on a set of issues in competitive and open seats; is the same true for interest groups?

Next, I assess for each week of the campaign the level of candidate dialogue. In the results shown in the next section, I use this measure first as a dependent variable, to assess when candidates converge on a set of issues; but I also use this as an important independent variable predicting interest group-candidate issue convergence. As noted earlier, if interest groups are loyal foot soldiers, we might expect candidate dialogue to produce interest group convergence.

I go further, however, by also measuring the level of candidate dialogue in specific issue areas. In Table 3 I split 32 issues into three major categories.¹⁰ These issues account for over 90 percent of all issue mentions. The issue ownership and issue convergence literature often reduce

major issues into different categories, with little consensus on how to do so. Petrocik (1996) uses survey data (and a plurality of respondents preferring one party's position on the issue) to classify issues as owned by the major parties. Simon (2002) assigns issues to each party on the basis of a disparity in issue mentions by one side. Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen (2003) assign issues depending on its role in the party's coalition.

[Table 3 here]

I split issues into liberal, conservative, and performance.¹¹ Liberal issues are issues traditionally seen as Democratic; or more generally, issues seen as promoting the expansion of government services. I chose not to label it an owned Democratic issue, so as to avoid confusion with other scholars' use of the concept, but I expect the Democrats to have advantages in these areas. In contrast, conservative issues are those traditionally seen as Republican; or more generally, issues seen as promoting the restriction of government in economic areas and the expansion of government in the foreign policy arena. Finally, performance issues are those relating to the actions of incumbents in the performance of office. I expect neither Democratic nor Republican candidates to have an a priori advantage here.

In Table 4 I show the mean proportion of issue dialogue—by week—on the three issue areas by Democratic and Republican candidates. I also show the mean level of issue dialogue between the candidates. As the Table demonstrates, in an average week Democratic candidates spend 40 percent of their ads talking about liberal issues, compared to 32 percent for Republican candidates. I also show the 95 percent confidence interval for each entry, which shows that Democrats and Republicans talk at significantly different levels about liberal issues (between 38.8 percent and 42.2 percent for Democrats and between 30.3 and 32.5 percent for Republicans). Even though Republicans talk about conservative issues more often than

Democrats (20.6 percent to 14.7 percent—and the confidence intervals show that those differences are statistically different), both talk about these issues at a lower rate than liberal ones.¹² Finally, both Democratic and Republican candidates have virtually the same mean proportion of performance discussion.

[Table 4 here]

In addition to candidate dialogue, I control for the level of negativity among candidates and interest groups. I operationalize this as the percentage of all ads aired by the candidate or interest group as purely negative; by implication, the remaining proportion of ads are those that are positive or contrasting. If interest groups are loyal foot soldiers, they may converge with their allies when the candidate is negative (follow the leader), but converge less when they go negative (to avoid hurting the candidate).

I also control for two other week-level variables. First, I include a dummy variable for whether it is late in the campaign (operationalized as the final 10 weeks of the campaign), and for the total number of ads aired by the candidate and interest group in that week. Because the issue convergence measure is not sensitive to the number of ads aired, it is important to assess whether issue convergence is higher in weeks where interest groups air fewer ads (after all, it is easier to talk about the same set of issues when you only air a handful).

In addition, I control for the number of media markets covered in the Senate race. The data are aggregated to the level of the state-week, but in some larger states, multiple media markets cover the state. In this sense, we should expect coordination of issue messages to be harder in states with multiple media markets.

I also include dummy variables for 2000 and 2004. These are important controls, if only to account for year-specific influences. Additionally, aggressive interest group advertising

matured in the elections of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Do interest groups get better at issue convergence with each passing election?

Finally, I take advantage of the structure of the data, which include when candidates and interest groups are airing ads, and conditional on joint talk, their level of issue convergence. I ran a heckman selection model, where the selection equation predicts joint discussion, and the regression predicts issue convergence. In the selection equation I include a variable for the week of the campaign, competitiveness, open seat dummy, Democratic incumbent dummy, and the dummy variables for 2000 and 2004.¹³ This structure affords us the opportunity to see when candidates and their interest group allies are both talking at the same time, and conditional on joint chatter, when they are talking about the same things.

4 Results

The results of three models are reported in Tables 6 and 7. I separated out the two stages of the Heckman model into two tables; Table 6 reports the estimates predicting joint discussion, and Table 7 reports the results predicting issue convergence. I clustered the results on state-year, which inflates the standard errors around the coefficient estimates. I expected the results within a state-year to be correlated (week 24 in the New York Senate race is clearly related to week 25), but I do not expect the observations to be highly correlated within state across years (for example, issue convergence in week 24 of the 2000 Missouri Senate race should not overly related to issue convergence in week 24 of the 2002 contest).¹⁴

[Table 6 here]

The results from the selection models indicate that candidates and interest groups talk at the same time later in the campaign and in more competitive races—as do candidates. We can

see this with the coefficient estimates for “week” and “competitiveness” in the first two rows of Table 6. The results show that in competitive elections and for weeks late in the campaign, paired participants (in each column) are more likely to have some value on the Issue Convergence scale; this means both participants are airing ads that week. This is no big surprise, and it reinforces existing literature about the pattern of group advertising (Goldstein and Freeman 2002); also noteworthy is that these results hold up even with the 2004 elections included (and even when looking only at the 2004 elections), when there were new incentives for groups to air soft money ads earlier in the campaign because of the BCRA restrictions relating to 60-day advertising.

[Table 7 here]

Turning to the issue convergence results in Table 7, there are a number of important findings. For example, candidate issue convergence is higher in weeks where Democratic and Republican candidates air a lot of ads. We can see this by looking at the coefficient estimates for both “Candidate Ads” rows in Column 1. Of course, high ad volume is correlated with competitive elections and open seats, so in races where candidates are active advertisers, dialogue goes up. Once controlling for ad volume, however, the direct measures of competitiveness or negativity have no significant relationship with candidate dialogue. At the same time, candidate dialogue goes down in states with multiple media markets; this is expected, as issue convergence is harder with multiple arenas (that is, each market is likely to have an ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox affiliate; so in states with 3 markets, this means candidates might be on the air with 12 different network affiliates).

In the Democratic convergence model (the second column), the year-specific dummy variables indicate higher levels of convergence in 2004 compared to other years. Pro-

Democratic interest groups also converge more with their favored candidates in races with a Democratic incumbent, but they diverge in open seat contests. At the same time, competitiveness has no relationship to levels of Democratic issue convergence. For Democratic groups, then, the nature of the race is important. In open seats, and in races with a Republican incumbent, issue convergence is probably more difficult. The candidate is likely new to the arena of Senate contests, and there may be no established (and indirect) cues on how to facilitate issue dialogue. Those conditions are more likely present in races when the favored candidate is the incumbent; for example, there may have even been an existing lobbying relationship between the candidate and her group allies. In addition, in weeks where pro-Democratic interest groups are negative, convergence goes down. In this sense, interest groups talk about a different set of issues when they go negative, perhaps reducing the chance that voters lump such ads into assessments of the favored candidate.

For Republicans issue convergence (the third column), the nature of the race is unimportant. Note the null effects for open seat, GOP incumbent, competitiveness, and negativity. Most important for pro-GOP interest groups is the level of *candidate* dialogue in a given week. The coefficient estimate for this variable is strongly significant ($p < .01$). To a lesser extent this also applies to pro-Democratic interest groups ($p < .10$). For both Democratic and Republican interest groups, then, when the campaign between the candidates is focused on a smaller set of issues (that is, when the agenda has been established), interest groups follow suit and wage their air war on those sets of issues. When candidates diverge and talk past each other—controlling for all else—interest groups do the same.

Of course, much of this might be dependent on the set of issues being considered. To assess this, I ran six additional convergence models (three for the Democrats and three for the

Republicans). The dependent variable was the level of issue convergence (for each party's candidate-interest group) on liberal, conservative, and performance issues. Instead of a single candidate dialogue independent variable, I included three variables tapping the level of candidate dialogue in all three areas.¹⁵ The results of the models are included in Table 8 (the coefficients on the control variables are excluded), and predicted probabilities are shown in Figure 2.¹⁶

[Table 8 here]

[Figure 2 here]

The results are interesting. For both Democrats and Republicans, candidate dialogue in their advantaged issue area has no effect on candidate-group convergence in that area. Thus, as Democrats and Republicans talk together more about liberal issues, pro-Democratic interest groups do not follow suit (see the top left panel in Figure 2). The same is true for conservative issue dialogue and Republican candidate-interest group convergence (the middle panel in the second row).

At the same time, however, when candidate dialogue goes up on the *least preferred issue area*, candidate-group convergence rises. Thus, as Democratic and Republican candidates talk more about conservative issues, pro-Democratic interest groups bolster their favored candidates by converging with them on those issues (the top middle panel, where convergence more than doubles from about .18 to .40) The same is true for Republican interest groups when the candidates fight over liberal issues (the bottom left panel). In this sense, both pro-Republican and pro-Democratic interest groups converge with their allies when those candidates need help on certain issues (i.e., those not typically assigned to that party).

Notably, these results are in line with the loyal foot soldier model, but not with my extensions of issue ownership theory. In other words, whereas we know that issue ownership

might predict less convergence between candidates on these issues, I argued it might predict more between candidates and their interest group allies (although to be fair to issue ownership scholarship, they are silent on this issue). With these results, it appears evident that interest groups do not fall in line with their favored candidate over potentially owned issues, but on issues owned by the competition.

Finally, when candidates wage an air war over performance issues, interest group allies bolster their candidates by reinforcing them in that area (see the third panel in both the top and bottom row of Figure 2). They also converge with the candidates on performance issues when the candidates are talking about the other party's preferred issues (see the results in Table 8). This makes sense. When candidates are fighting over liberal issues, for example, Republican groups can aid candidates first by talking about liberal issues, and by bolstering their candidate in the performance arena (possibly to remind viewers that on these disadvantaged set of issues, the candidate is likely to work hard and perform well if (re)elected).

All told, it appears that interest groups converge with candidates when they are most needed. If the debate is on liberal issues—one where the Democrats are presumably advantaged, and already talk more often than Republican candidates—pro-Democratic interest groups feel little need to join the fray. When the debate is over conservative issues and performance issues, these groups come to the rescue. The same dynamic is true for pro-Republican groups.

5 Conclusions

While the level of interest group engagement is modest, interest group advertisements have drawn the ire of campaign reform advocates. Pro-Democratic and Republican interest groups in 2000-2004 have invested thousands of dollars in thousands of ads featuring candidates

for the Senate. Indeed, there have been nearly 60 advertising campaigns waged by interest groups on behalf of Senate candidates in these years (see again Table 1). What can we say about interest group issue convergence with these candidate allies? Are interest groups loose cannons, doing more potential harm than good for those they seek to help? Or are interest groups loyal foot soldiers, acting “as if” they were candidates and converging on the same set of issues at optimal times?

The results of the analysis show more evidence for the loyal foot soldier model. Although issue convergence does not go up in competitive races or in open seats, interest groups match their preferred candidate when candidates on both sides are talking jointly about a set of issues. And when Democratic interest groups go negative, they diverge from the set of issues discussed by the Democratic candidate. Finally, it appears that partisan interest groups match their ally when the issue debate between candidates is on a set of issues that their candidate might be disadvantaged on. When candidates fight over liberal issues, Republican groups aid their candidate; when the debate is conservative issues, Democratic groups join the fray. Finally, when candidates are waging the battle on performance issues, groups jump in here as well.

All told, interest groups are fulfilling their implied mission with candidate-based advertisements. In addition, they are very much part of the web of influence that the literature on party networks expects. In this sense, we see evidence here that Democratic and Republican candidates are not alone in their struggles to win office. Just as formal party organizations are spending vast sums of money to win majority control of Congress, interested groups—also very invested in the outcome of this majority power struggle—are joining the mix in very efficient ways, by waging battle in the air war on the same issue terms as the other players. Indeed, we see with these results a true case where candidates and formal party organizations are getting by

“with a little help from their friends.”

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Interest Groups Airing Ads for Senate Candidates

Year	Interest Group	Ads aired	# of Senate races	Party Ally
2000	Chamber of Commerce	1,908	2	GOP
	Americans for Quality Nursing Health Care	1,877	5	GOP
	Americans for Job Security	1,854	3	GOP
	Business Roundtable	1,584	2	GOP
	Republican Leadership Council	1,073	2	GOP
	American Medical Association	219	1	GOP
	National Rifle Association	172	1	GOP
	Citizens for a Better America	72	1	GOP
	RuffPAC	16	1	GOP
	National Pro-Life Association	15	1	GOP
	RODPAC	5	1	GOP
	Right to Work Committee	1	1	GOP
	NARAL	1	1	Democrats
	STOPH1B	34	1	Democrats
	ASBESTOS	122	1	Democrats
	AFL-CIO	269	1	Democrats
	Sierra Club	383	3	Democrats
	Women Vote	384	1	Democrats
	HCVF	569	3	Democrats
	Voters for Choice	683	2	Democrats
Emily's List	800	1	Democrats	
League of Conservation Voters	1,370	4	Democrats	
2002	Americans for Job Security	2,172	5	GOP
	American Medical Association	1,036	2	GOP
	United Seniors Association	1,006	3	GOP
	Club for Growth	647	5	GOP
	TV 2002 (Texas Values)	597	1	GOP
	National Association of Realtors	86	1	GOP
	Texas Victory 2002	19	1	GOP
	Natural Resource Defense Council	1	1	Democrats
	Campaign for America's Future	132	1	Democrats
	Every Child Matters	182	1	Democrats
	National Education Association	194	1	Democrats
	People For the American Way	203	2	Democrats
	Arkansas Education Association	299	1	Democrats
	NARAL Pro-Choice America	386	2	Democrats

	League of Conservation Voters	422	1	Democrats
	Reform Voter Project	665	2	Democrats
	Sierra Club	1,345	9	Democrats
	AFL-CIO	3,158	7	Democrats
2004	Club for Growth	4,223	3	GOP
	Americans for Job Security	2,219	4	GOP
	American Medical Association	902	3	GOP
	National Association of Realtors	801	2	GOP
	New York Republican Federal	559	1	GOP
	Colorado Conservative Voters	538	1	GOP
	National Rifle Association	304	2	GOP
	Americans United to Preserve Marriage	149	1	GOP
	US Chamber of Commerce	110	1	GOP
	Humane USA	85	1	GOP
	Empower Illinois Media Fund	43	1	GOP
	National Right to Work Committee	32	2	GOP
	VanguardPAC.org	2	1	GOP
	Coalition for Future America	97	1	Democrats
	League of Conservation Voter	691	3	Democrats
	Emily's List	1,234	1	Democrats
	Citizens for a Strong Senate	4,877	5	Democrats

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project

Table 2: Distribution of Senate Ads by Sponsor

Sponsor	2000	2002	2004
Candidates	137,194 (67%)	166,698 (61%)	193,761 (77%)
Party organizations	53,230 (26%)	93,924 (34%)	35,611 (14%)
Interest groups	14,097 (7 %)	12,384 (5%)	13,313 (5%)
Coordinated Candidate-Party	--	--	10,391 (4%)
Total	204,521	273,006	253,076

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project; 2000 data are based on top 75 media markets; 2002 and 2004 are based on top 100 markets.

*2000 and 2002 data did not code for coordinated expenditures, assigning any joint sponsorship as a party ad.

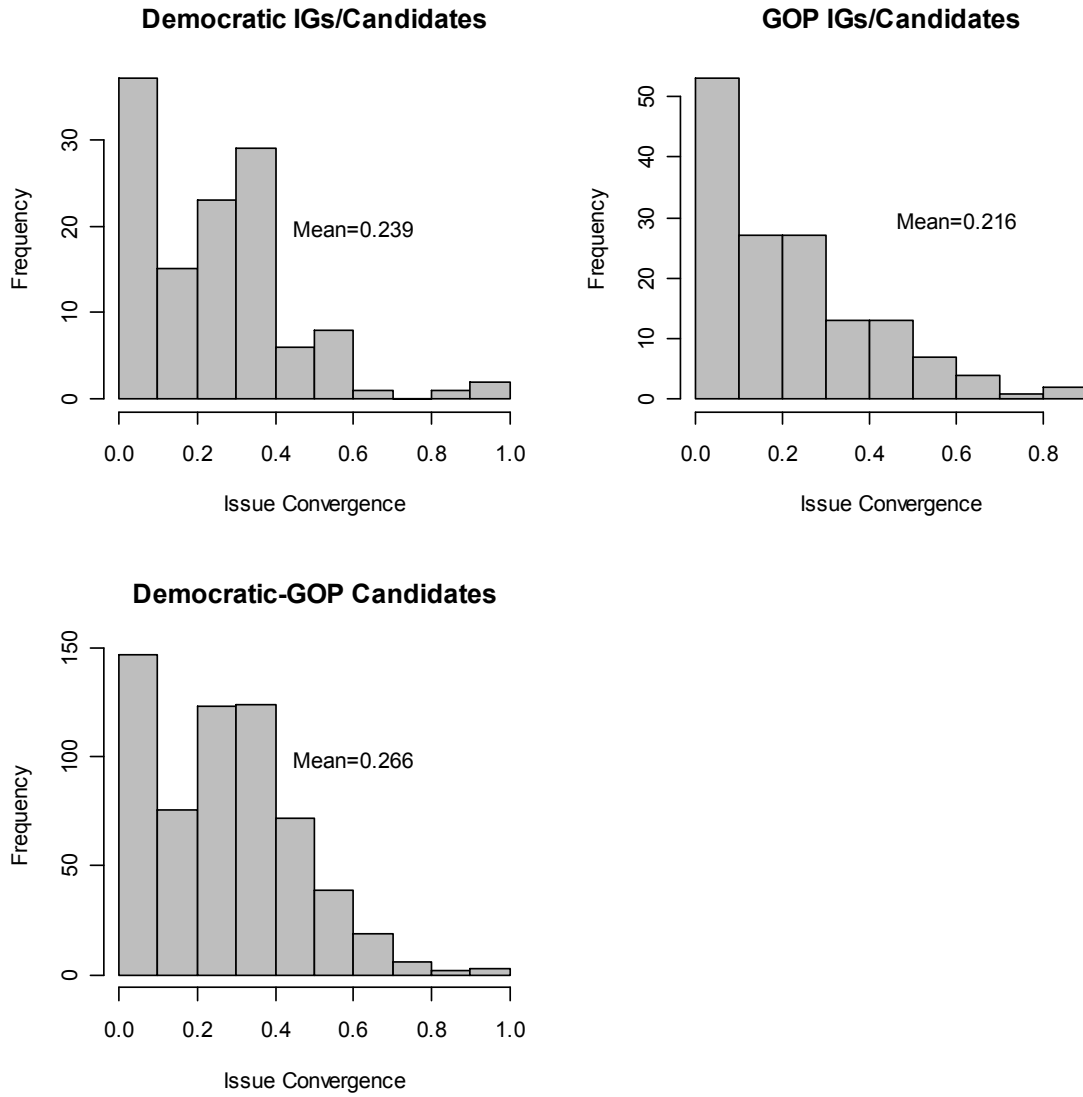
**Percents are column percents

Table 3: An Issue Convergence Exercise

	Issue 1 ads	Issue 2 ads	Issue 3 ads	Issue 4 ads	Issue 5 ads	Total
<i>Sponsor</i>						
Candidates (c)	0	.25	.40	.75	.25	
Interest Groups (IG)	.60	0	.30	.40	0	
$ I_{IC} - I_{IG} $.60	.25	.10	.35	.25	1.55
$(I_{IC} + I_{IG})$.60	.25	.70	1.15	.25	2.95
Convergence						1-(1.55/2.95) 47.4%

*There are over 30 issues areas for the actual estimation; only five are shown for this example.

Figure 1: Issue Convergence by Week



*Measured for each week of the campaign.

Table 4: Issue Classifications

Liberal Issues	Conservative Issues	Performance Issues
Minimum wage	Taxes	Background
Employment/Jobs	Deficit/surplus/budget	Political record
Poverty	Government spending	Personal values
Education/Schools	Business	Special interests
Lottery for Education	International Trade	Constituency service
Child Care	Crime	Ideology
Prescription Drugs	Drugs	Honesty/integrity
Environment	Death Penalty	Attendance record
Social Security	Gun control	
Medicare	Defense	
Welfare	Star Wars	
	Foreign policy	

**Source*: Issue codes of the Wisconsin Advertising Project data

Table 5: Issue Discussion by Senate Democratic and Republican Candidates/Formal Party Organizations

	Mean	Standard Deviation	95% Confidence	N
Democratic-Liberal Issue	.405	.263	+/- 1.7%	879
Republican-Liberal Issue	.319	.263	+/- 1.6%	968
Democratic-Conservative Issue	.147	.172	+/- 1.1%	879
Republican-Conservative Issue	.206	.209	+/- 1.3%	968
Democratic-Performance Issue	.287	.238	+/- 1.6%	879
Republican-Performance Issue	.289	.242	+/- 1.5%	968
Liberal Issue dialogue	.253	.283	+/- 2.3%	589
Conservative Issue dialogue	.187	.280	+/- 2.4%	533
Performance Issue dialogue	.253	.287	+/- 2.3%	585

*The first six rows are the mean percentage of all ads aired by the Democrats and Republicans on the three issues areas (i.e., the mean Democratic-Liberal entry of .405 means that during an average week, 40.5 percent of Democratic candidate ads were about liberal issues)

**The final three rows are the mean issue dialogue, by week, between Democratic and Republican candidates.

Table 6: Predicting Joint Discussion

	<i>Between candidates</i>	<i>Between Democrats and IG allies</i>	<i>Between Republicans and IG allies</i>
Joint Discussion (0=No; 1=Yes)			
Week	.057 (.012)**	.073 (.015)**	.069 (.014)**
Competitiveness	.448 (.132)**	.733 (.153)**	.493 (.157)**
Open Seat	.187 (.254)	.299 (.265)	.070 (.271)
Democratic Incumbent	.113 (.221)	.007 (.336)	-.028 (.370)
2000	.008 (.207)	.320 (.276)	.786 (.268)**
2004	-.000 (.220)	.417 (.281)	.472 (.277)+
Constant	-3.11 (.669)**	-5.73 (.885)**	-5.56 (.919)**
N	1274	1267	1249
Numb. of clusters	62	27	28

**p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10

^All tests are two-tailed, and SEs are in parentheses. Clustered on State-Year. Unit of analysis is week-campaign.

^^Dependent Variable in first column predicts whether Democratic and Republican candidates air ads in the same week of a campaign. Dependent Variable in other two columns predicts whether candidates and their interest group allies air ads in the same week. These are results from the selection equation of the heckman selection model.

Table 7: Predicting Issue Convergence

	<i>Between candidates</i>	<i>Between Democrats and IG allies</i>	<i>Between Republicans and IG allies</i>
Issue Convergence (range, 0-1)			
Late (week>33)	-.010 (.037)	-.071 (.073)	-.070 (.105)
IG ads (100s)		.034 (.017)*	.001 (.015)
Candidate ads (Dem)(100s)	.007 (.002)**	-.007 (.004)	
Candidate ads (GOP)(100s)	.005 (.002)*		-.008 (.010)
Open Seat	.020 (.025)	-.175 (.046)**	-.099 (.110)
Democratic Incumbent	-.024 (.031)	.080 (.044)+	-.080 (.080)
Competitiveness	-.007 (.015)	-.013 (.031)	-.009 (.030)
Markets Covered	-.026 (.006)**	.015 (.015)	.030 (.037)
IG negativity (%)		-.090 (.035)*	.049 (.073)
Candidate Negativity (Dem) (%)	.022 (.041)	.099 (.065)	
Candidate Negativity (GOP) (%)	-.021 (.038)		.050 (.089)
Candidate dialogue		.232 (.138)+	.378 (.113)**
2000	.029 (.025)	.063 (.052)	.156 (.089)+
2004	-.001 (.026)	.194 (.065)**	-.020 (.098)
Constant	.291 (.083)**	.351 (.166)*	-.407 (.255)
N (uncensored)	601	115	122
Numb. of clusters	62	27	28

**p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10

^All tests are two-tailed, and SEs are in parentheses. Clustered on State-Year. Unit of analysis is week-campaign.

^^Dependent Variable in first column is overall issue convergence between the Democratic and Republican candidate. Dependent Variable in other two columns is issue convergence between candidate and their interest group allies. These results are from a heckman selection model and are conditional on Joint Discussion (from Table 6).

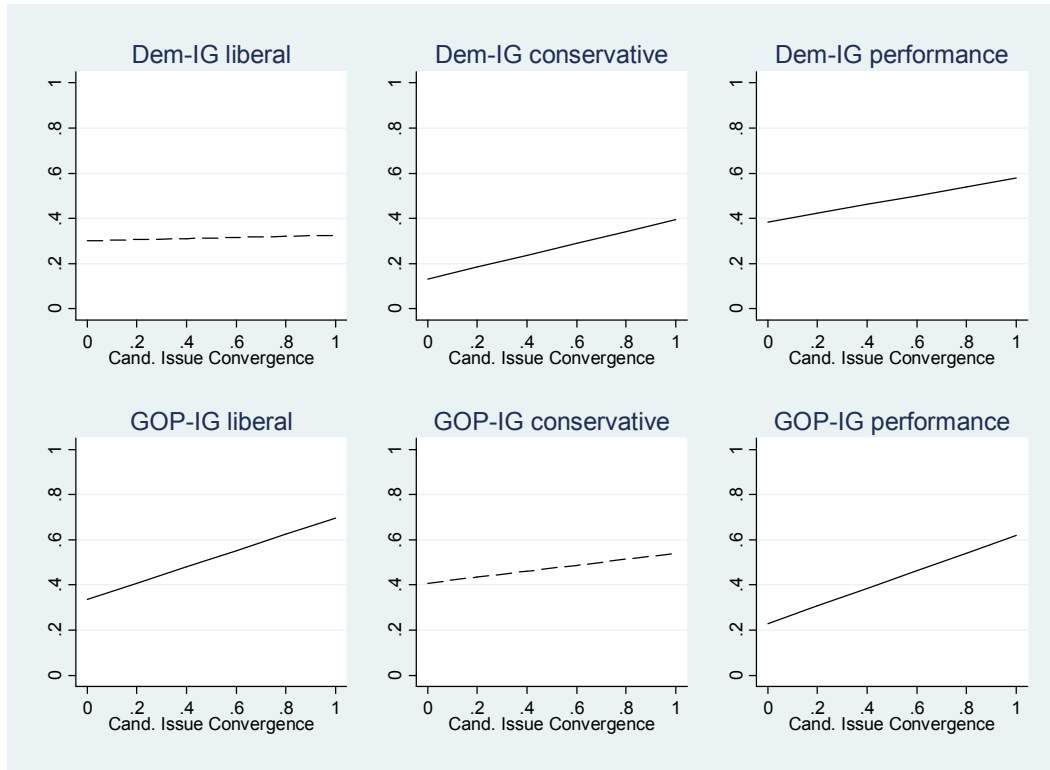
Table 8: Predicting Issue Convergence in Different Issue Areas

	Candidate-Interest Group Issue Convergence		
	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Performance</i>
Candidate Issue Convergence		<i>Democrats</i>	
Liberal Issues	.024 (.101)	.140 (.039)**	.062 (.092)
Conservative Issues	.115 (.116)	.263 (.110)*	.275 (.099)**
Performance Issues	.094 (.117)	.125 (.081)	.194 (.062)**
		<i>Republicans</i>	
Liberal Issues	.362 (.112)**	.190 (.119)	.302 (.148)*
Conservative Issues	.038 (.092)	.133 (.122)	.084 (.111)
Performance Issues	.074 (.057)	.050 (.111)	.389 (.103)**

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ + $p < .10$

^All tests are two-tailed, and SEs are in parentheses. Clustered on State-Year. Unit of analysis is week-campaign.

^^Coefficient estimates on other control variables (for Joint Discussion selection equation and Issue Convergence equation) are not shown.

Figure 2: Predicted Level of Issue Convergence

*X-axis is issue convergence between Democratic and Republican candidates on the specific issue area; Y-axis is the predicted issue convergence between Democrats (or Republicans) and their interest group allies in that issue area.

**Dashed lines indicate the relationship is not statistically significant (see coefficient estimates in Table 6).

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Endnotes

¹ Numbers for 2000 are based on advertisements aired in the top 75 media markets. Frequencies for the 2002 and 2004 elections are based on the top 100 markets.

² McCarty and Rothenberg (2000) and Wawro (2001) are exceptions in that they examine how campaign contributions change over the course of a congressional session. There is also little research that investigates interest group strategies specifically in Senate contests (Grier and Munger 1993, Grier, Munger and Torrent N.d.).

³ Interest groups accounted for 16 percent of all House ads in 2000, but only 3 percent in 2004. By contrast, interest groups aired 10 percent of presidential ads in 2000, but sponsored nearly 20 percent in 2004. See Franz, Rivlin and Goldstein (2006) for further explanations of these trends.

⁴ I have no systematic evidence of the interest group ground war (i.e., GOTV efforts or campaign literature). This surely depresses the actual level of interest group engagement, and limits what can be said of total issue convergence in the campaign.

⁵ This is from her deposition for *McConnell v. FEC*

⁶ The data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project are available to scholars for a minimal processing fee at <http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising>

⁷ See Goldstein and Freeman (2002) for a discussion of the structure of the data. As noted by Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006), the Wisconsin Advertising Data exclude the advertising of states with smaller media markets. As such, I am unable to measure issue convergence in such states as Alaska, Hawaii, North and South Dakota, Montana, Vermont, and Wyoming.

⁸ Parker (2005) does an analysis of the issue content in candidate and party political advertisements and finds strong relationships, partly moderated by who is the first to advertise.

⁹ My measure of issue convergence is slightly different from Kaplan, Ridout and Park (2006) and Sigelman and Buel (2004). They determine the percentage of total resources allocated to each issue area, where the total is 100 percent. Under my operationalization, an interest group, in the extreme, can allocate 100 percent of its resources to four issues.

¹⁰ As mentioned, coders were asked to assess issue coverage in ads on up to four. While the issue coverage varies slightly by year (for example, Clinton's impeachment is listed on the 2000 coding sheet, but not the 2002 or 2004 sheet), these issues are repeated in all three years.

¹¹ Petrocik (1996) also uses the term performance issues, but his meaning is only tangential to mine. He defines foreign relations, the economy, and government functioning as performance issues, arguing that any party can gain temporary advantages or disadvantages in these areas. I see performance issues as relating explicitly to the candidate's actions in office, or her ability to perform the job successfully.

¹² The ratio of mean Democratic to Republican liberal issue mentions and Republican to Democratic conservative issue mentions is nearly the same: 1.26 to 1.40

¹³ I include a week variable in the selection equation, but a "late (week>33)" dummy variable in the regression model. In the selection model there are a much higher number of cases (there are a lot more weeks where interest groups and candidates do not talk at the same time). With the fewer cases in the regression, I am asking less of the data with the dummy variable.

¹⁴ I tested for this clustering only on state; only on year; and on week. The substantive results are unaffected.

¹⁵ I lose a few cases by including these variables, because there are a small number of instances where Democratic (or Republican) candidates and allied interest groups talk with each other but Democratic and Republican candidates aren't talking about these issues.

¹⁶ I hold ad volume at their means, as I do for competitiveness, number of markets covered, negativity, and the other dialogue variables. I estimate predicted issue convergence for a race with a Democratic incumbent, late in the campaign, and for 2002.