

Advertising an Agenda? Examining the Consistency between Campaign Issue Emphasis and Presidential Issue Priorities, 1980-2001

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Presidential candidates often make issue appeals during their campaigns, but question exists as to whether the actions of presidents are consistent with their messages as candidates. Examining presidential documents and direct communications between candidates and voters allows an exploration of the degree to which presidential priorities reflect issues emphasized in campaigns. This analysis is followed by a discussion of the effects of electoral dynamics on the consistency between campaign messages and presidential agendas.

Elections serve as the principal linkage between voters and public officials. During a campaign, candidates present their views and qualifications while often criticizing their opponents in an effort to win support. As presidential candidates seek to convey their messages directly to a large number of voters, paid television advertising has become their chief mode of communicating with voters during campaigns. Research indicates that political ads educate and motivate voters, thus leading to a more informed and engaged electorate. Attesting to the key role of ads in contemporary politics, candidates and parties spent \$470 million on television ads in the 2004 presidential campaign. While candidates are largely unable to control many of the factors influencing elections, they frequently try to woo voters through issue appeals in their television advertisements; issue appeals constituted a majority of all appeals in primary and general election presidential ads between 1980 and 2000. Questions, however, exist regarding the degree to which campaign appeals in the primary and general elections reflect the presidential priorities of ultimately successful candidates.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship investigating the link between campaign appeals and presidential initiatives has primarily focused on the fulfillment of campaign promises. In their study of party platform pledges, Pomper and Lederman find that presidents generally implement these promises. Between 1944 and 1966, presidents sought to implement 90 percent of platform pledges and ultimately fulfilled or partially fulfilled 72 percent of them. These authors conclude that between 1968 and 1978, however, presidents fulfilled or partially fulfilled only 63 percent of

platform pledges, taking no action on 32 percent of platform promises. In analyzing campaign promises as reported by media sources between 1912 and 1976, Krukones determines that presidents made at least a “good faith” effort to fulfill 80.0 percent of all promises and 72.5 percent of major pledges. Presidents ultimately fulfilled 73.4 percent of all campaign pledges and 61.0 percent of major promises. Similarly, in studying Presidents Kennedy through Reagan, Fishel finds that roughly two-thirds of these presidents’ executive actions and legislative proposals were consistent with promises communicated in campaign speeches, position papers, and background materials, although he does note that most presidential actions do not stem from campaign promises.

While Pomper and Lederman, Krukones, and Fishel aim to determine if presidents maintained campaign commitments, they do not show whether campaigns accurately foreshadow the amount of attention presidents devote to various issue areas. As less than 25 percent of presidential acts are directed toward fulfillment of campaign pledges, a list of promises communicated through speeches and campaign literature will not necessarily reflect a successful candidate’s issue priorities.

These researchers’ methodologies, moreover, do not analyze the main messages that candidates send directly to the public; thus, their research designs do not facilitate an adequate investigation of the consistency between campaign appeals and presidential priorities. As relatively few voters read party platforms, request candidate position papers, or attend campaign rallies, candidates do not necessarily use these forums to communicate to the average voter. Presidential candidates, furthermore, may not always support all positions of their party’s platform, as demonstrated by Carter’s pro-life stance despite the abortion rights plank of the 1980 Democratic

platform. In addition, media reports of campaigns are not ideal sources of data since they distort candidates' messages by providing selective coverage of campaign activities and overemphasizing the attention a candidate pays to issues commonly associated with his or her party.

A study of the consistency between campaign communications and presidential agendas should analyze the occurrence of major issue themes in the most direct forms of candidate and presidential communication – paid political advertising and presidential statements. Comparing the attention successful candidates devote to major issues on the campaign trail and in the White House should allow a measure of the predictive quality of electoral campaigns on presidential agendas. Paid political advertising reflects the messages that candidates try to communicate to voters. Viewed by a large segment of the electorate, these ads, unlike news reports of campaigns, are not filtered by the media. The content of campaign ads thus serves as a reliable indicator of the messages that candidates hope to communicate to voters. After a candidate wins the election, the content of presidential addresses and press releases serves as an adequate indicator of presidential priorities and, unlike some of the past studies focusing on actual fulfillment of campaign pledges, is not heavily conditioned by congressional activity. Research indicates that presidential statements are accurate reflections of presidential preferences and are not overly influenced by purely strategic political considerations, namely anticipated congressional support.

Adopting this approach, Geer and Arrington examine presidential communications and paid political advertisements in order to analyze the relationship between campaign issue emphasis and presidential agendas. In comparing general election ad appeals to State of the Union and inaugural addresses between 1960 and 1996, the authors find that a 10 percent increase in campaign attention to an issue corresponds with a 3 percent increase in presidential attention to the matter. The regression equation's constant of about 7.5, however, means that most major issues receive considerable presidential attention whether or not they are addressed in campaigns.

Methodology

This paper differs from previous studies of campaign commitments in that it examines appeals made throughout the visible electoral

process. While existing scholarship focuses on presidential policies as a reflection of appeals made during general election campaigns, this paper seeks to facilitate a better understanding of the degree to which presidential policy reflects campaign appeals by examining television ads aired during *both* the primary and general campaigns. Primary campaigns are important for establishing candidate priorities; being more positive than general election campaigns, they tend to focus more on the candidates' policy proposals and less on the failures of the opposition party. Primary ads, moreover, may contain appeals to partisan constituencies that receive little notice in the general election, yet receive attention from presidents. In comparison with general election campaigns, ads in primary contests contain fewer responses to the other party's issue appeals and, therefore, may be more representative of the candidates' true priorities. Furthermore, examining both primary and general ads permits an investigation of any additive or interactive effects of the two campaigns.

In exploring the relationship between campaign appeals and presidential policy, this study relies on established sources of information. Geer's data sets of primary and general election ads provide the campaign advertisement data for this paper. Geer's files contain 756 primary and 546 general election ads coded for nearly 1,000 issue themes,¹³ allowing a detailed examination of issue appeals. This paper examines all known primary ads from 1980, the approximate beginning of the steady state period of the current nominating system,¹⁴ until 1996, the last year for which data are available. General election ad data for this paper cover all known candidate-sponsored ads produced between 1980 and 2000. In the primary and general ads studied for this paper, presidential candidates made 8,421 issue appeals ads, accounting for 54 percent of all ad appeals.

In operationalizing the concept of presidential agendas, this paper examines the number of pages in the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* that reference specific issue areas in each year included in the analysis. Published by the National Archives and Records Administration, this collection of documents contains all speeches, executive orders, interviews, and remarks issued by presidents. This comprehensive compilation permits an investigation of the attention presidents ultimately give to issues; these documents are directly issued by the White House, so they, unlike news reports, are not subject to media bias. Several scholars have relied on these compi-

lations to gauge presidential attention to issues.

Documents from the first year only of each presidential term between 1981 and 2001 are examined to measure presidential attention to specified issues. The first year of each administration best illustrates presidential issue priorities and the link between campaign appeals and issues of chief concern. A president would be expected to bring forward major legislative initiatives during his post-election “honeymoon,” a period of heightened congressional, media, and public support for the chief executive. Over the course of an administration, presidents may move further from their campaign messages in response to political developments. A president may also alter his agenda as the midterm elections approach, hoping that a new course will minimize congressional losses.

This study examines candidates’ and presidents’ attention to twelve distinct issues. Of these twelve issues, nine were among the most common issue references in advertisements produced between 1980 and 2000 – defense, budget, employment (i.e. jobs), inflation, health care, education, crime/drugs, taxes, and environment. Three other issues – abortion, immigration, and Social Security – have been the focus of many contemporary political debates but relatively fewer campaign ad appeals. Applying the issue-ownership theory, these twelve issue areas include Republican-owned issues (defense, crime/drugs), Democratic-owned issues (education, health care), and performance-based issues (inflation, employment) which may be “leased” by either party. For ultimately successful presidential candidates, these twelve areas account for 54 percent of all issue appeals in primary ads and 63 percent of issue appeals in general election ads. In the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 38 percent of pages reference these issues. Given that several hundred pages of each volume from the first year of a presidential administration are devoted to proclamations and nominations, these twelve issue areas cover approximately half the pages with issue references.

Although much of the examination of data in this study is descriptive, Pearson correlations and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression are used to measure relationships between variables. Independent, additive, and multiplicative effects of independent variables are investigated. Relationships can be examined in the aggregate as well as for individual administrations and issue areas.

Hypotheses

These data allow investigation of several hypotheses on the connection between campaign appeals and presidential agendas. Comparison of primary and general election ad data reveals whether or not the shift from a nomination to a general election contest leads to a change in issue focus. Although primary campaigns and general election campaigns occur in distinct electoral contexts and necessitate different strategies, candidates can not ignore the broad political context; therefore, they must focus on certain issues throughout a campaign regardless of their party’s traditional strength on the matters. By adopting certain issues as major campaign themes, candidates may generate support among both primary and general election constituencies. Although primary campaigns tend to be overwhelmingly positive, these assumptions suggest that negative primary appeals on an issue should be closely associated with general election attacks on the same issue. A candidate’s strong association with an issue in a primary, moreover, may effectively prevent abandonment of the issue in the general election campaign. These observations support the following hypothesis: The content of primary and general election ads should be correlated, and OLS regression should indicate that primary election ad content can predict much of the variation in general election ad content.

After appealing to voters in primary and general election contests, a successful candidate must shift his focus to governing. Research and anecdotal evidence indicate that presidents act in accordance with campaign appeals or, at a minimum, keep most of their promises. Candidates’ ad appeals and presidents’ agendas are both driven by interests of key constituencies and pressing national concerns. The president, moreover, is also accountable to the same electorate that voted him into office on the basis, at least in part, of his perceived issues priorities. The rival party is usually eager to remind voters of inconsistencies between campaigns and governance. Empirical evidence should thus support this paper’s primary hypothesis: The degree of attention candidates devote to specific issues in both primary and general election ads allows a prediction of presidential attention to these issues.

A measure of total primary and general election attention to issues may provide a superior prediction of presidential agendas. Issues referenced in only the primary or general campaign may have been mentioned in response to short

term political forces or to a rival candidate's appeals. Issues stressed in both primary and general campaigns, however, may be a candidate's top priorities. If an issue is of major concern to the public, moreover, it receives attention in both the primary and general campaigns; consequently, the successful candidate will confront such issues as president. These assumptions support another hypothesis: Issues raised in both primary and general ads are strongly related to presidents' agendas.

In a close contest, a candidate may feel a strong need to respond to rivals' issue appeals to prevent the opposition from monopolizing an issue. Candidates enjoying a considerable lead, however, may not feel as compelled to respond to all their opponents' issue appeals. Previous research indeed indicates that candidates in more competitive races discuss a broader array of issues. Once in office, however, a president may wish to expend his political capital on the issues he and his chief constituencies consider most important, not the issues he addressed for political expediency. This reasoning supports an additional hypothesis: Closer elections lead to a greater inconsistency between campaign issue emphasis and presidential issue priorities.

The assumptions presented may also apply to the relationship between primary and general election advertising. In an effort to win support, trailing candidates may shift their issue focus, resulting in less consistency between the primary and general issue appeals. Such efforts, however, usually do not lead to victory. This assumption supports a corollary to the hypothesis above: The correlations between primary and general ad appeals are stronger for the ultimately successful candidate.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that presidents may sometimes devote considerable attention to matters that were not major campaign issues. Focusing on controversial policies during a campaign may alienate some voters or may be unnecessary if these issues receive significant free media attention. Once in office, however, presidents take advantage of the honeymoon period to press for enactment of their more parochial proposals, such as health care for Clinton, defense for Reagan, or taxes for G.W. Bush. Implementing these more controversial – and expensive – proposals into law may require the expenditure of more political capital than widely supported propositions; consequently, presidents may direct more speeches and press releases to these issues in hopes of increasing support. Thus, presidential

attention during the first year of an administration may be skewed toward certain issue areas. These assumptions lead to another hypothesis: Candidates devote greater attention to their widely supported proposals, but once in office, they may make more parochial policies their priorities.

Consistency between Primary and General Election Ads

Empirical findings support most of the hypotheses. The issue content of primary and general ads enjoys a correlation of 0.530, significant at the 0.001 level. Primary ad content does allow fairly good predictions of general election ads, explaining 40.6 percent of the variance in the attention of general election ads to specified issue areas. Regression modeling yields the following equation relating the percentage of general election campaign appeals for an issue (y) and percentage of primary appeals for an issue (x): $y = 2.339 + 0.649x$.

When limiting the investigation to negative appeals, primary issue appeals become weaker predictors of general election appeals, probably due to the much more positive nature of primary campaigns. Using the equation $y = 2.164 + 0.764x$, regression indicates that primary negativity only explains 21 percent of the variance in general election negativity. This slope, however, shows that three general election negative appeals are made for every four additional primary negative appeals. Although many issues may be the subject of negative appeals in the general campaign but not in the primaries, the opposite is not necessarily true. Negative appeals on an issue in the primary campaign tend to be associated with negative general election appeals on the issue.

Consistency between Campaign Ads and Presidential Agendas

Initial comparison of campaign appeals and presidential attention to the twelve issue areas does not give unequivocal support to the hypothesis that campaign appeals bear a significant relationship to presidential issue references. While a statistically significant correlation of 0.380 exists between the percentages of primary issue appeals and presidential references to the issues examined, the relationship between general election appeals and presidential agendas does not achieve statistical significance.

CAMPAIGN ISSUE EMPHASIS AND PRESIDENTIAL ISSUE PRIORITIES

		Primary	General	1st-Year Agenda
Primary	Pearson Correlation	1	.647 **	.380 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.008
	N	48	48	48
General	Pearson Correlation	.647 **	1	.160
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.179
	N	48	72	72
1st-Year Agenda	Pearson Correlation	.380 **	.160	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.179	
	N	48	72	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1: Primary Ad, General Ad, and First-Year Agenda Correlations

President	Primary Correlation and Significance (12 Issues)	General Correlation and Significance (12 Issues)	Primary Correlation and Significance (9 Issues)	General Correlation and Significance (9 Issues)
Reagan (1st Term)	0.688 (0.013)	0.285 (0.370)	0.903 (0.001)	0.921 (0.000)
Reagan (2nd Term)	Not Applicable	0.352 (0.261)	Not Applicable	0.950 (0.000)
G.H.W. Bush	0.339 (0.281)	0.519 (0.084)	0.278 (0.469)	0.599 (0.089)
Clinton (1st Term)	0.402 (0.195)	0.339 (0.199)	0.480 (0.191)	0.439 (0.238)
Clinton (2nd Term)	0.458 (0.135)	0.533 (0.074)	0.370 (0.327)	0.502 (0.168)
G.W. Bush (1st Term)	Not Available	0.241 (0.451)	Not Available	0.143 (0.713)

Table 2: Presidential Ad and Campaign Ad Content Correlations, by Administration

A closer examination, however, reveals that considerable agreement exists between campaign appeals and presidential agendas for attention devoted to most of the issues under investigation. A few issues, therefore, namely budget, employment, and inflation, may skew the results. Presidents devote considerably more attention to budgetary issues than do presidential candidates, a reasonable observation given that development of the federal budget is a major task for the president, while general budgetary matters may pose little interest to the average voter. Other economic issues, such as employment and inflation, however, receive more attention from candidates than from presidents. Candidates frequently point to a sagging economy or claim credit for prosperity; presidents, often unable to effect serious economic change, are less likely to discuss these economic matters than are candidates. A president serving during hard times, moreover, would avoid reminding voters of national economic woes.

Eliminating “budget” issues and the economic performance issues “inflation” and “employment”

from the analysis yields only slightly higher two-tailed correlations between presidential agendas and campaign appeals. The correlation for primaries rises to 0.391, while the general ad correlation increases to 0.166, with only the correlation for primaries achieving significance. Presidents Reagan, Clinton, G.H.W. Bush, and G.W. Bush have had different levels of consistency between campaign appeals and their presidential agendas. Table 2 provides the two-tailed correlations between campaign ads and presidential agendas for all twelve issue areas examined and for the shorter issue list which excludes budget, employment, and inflation issues.

Further regression analysis fails to support the hypothesis that campaign ad appeals predict the attention that presidents devote to specified issues. Using presidential issue references to all twelve issues as the dependent variable and primary ad appeals as the sole independent variable, the regression equation produces an adjusted r^2 value of 0.126; using general ad content as the independent variable yields an

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.006	.486		2.072	.044
PrimXGen	-.049	.009	-1.462	-5.723	.000
Primary	.515	.100	.995	5.146	.000
General	.493	.093	.956	5.310	.000

a. Dependent Variable: 1st-Year Agenda

Table 3: Coefficients for Regression Model

Candidate	Primary/General Issue Correlation
Carter 1980	0.300 (0.343)
Reagan 1980	0.552 (0.063)
Mondale 1984	0.369 (0.238)
Dukakis 1988	0.159 (0.621)
Bush 1988	0.285 (0.369)
Clinton 1992	0.892 (0.000)
Bush 1992	0.035 (0.913)
Clinton 1996	0.808 (0.001)

Table 4: Candidate and Primary/General Campaign Consistency Correlations

adjusted r^2 of 0.012; and using both primary and general ad appeals as independent variables leads to an adjusted r^2 of 0.152. When excluding budget, employment, and inflation issues – three areas where inconsistencies between candidate and presidential rhetoric are expected – the two variables explain only 22 percent of the variation in presidential attention to issues. It is notable that a meaningful relationship does not appear to exist between presidential issue positions and primary or general ads considered independently. These findings seem to indicate that a successful candidate emphasizes different issues as president and as a candidate.

Although data analysis does not point to a strong relationship between presidential agendas and ad appeals of each campaign phase, multiplicative and additive variables formed from the primary and general ad content variables may bear stronger relationships to presidential agendas. The interactive effect of the two independent variables points to the conditional effect of primary and general ad appeals on presidential agendas. Nonetheless, the weak correlation between the multiplicative variable and presidential issue references fails to reach statistical significance. Adding the interaction of primary and general ad content to the model predicting presidential attention to the twelve issue areas, however, raises the adjusted

r^2 value from 0.152 to 0.503. Regression coefficients for these variables are shown in Table 3.

An investigation of the additive effects of primary and general ad appeals is also warranted. This additive variable and first-year presidential references have a correlation coefficient of 0.432 that is significant at the 0.01 level; this correlation is considerably stronger than the correlation between presidential agendas and the other ad content variables.

Further examination of the joint effects of party and general ad appeals involves an ordinal measure of campaign attitudes to specified issues. An issue is coded 0 if the candidate did not reference it in either primary or general campaign ads, coded 1 if the issue was mentioned in primary or general ads but not in both, and coded 2 if the candidate referenced it in both primary and general ads. For each unit increase on this ordinal measure, presidential references to an issue increase by 0.644 standard deviations. Therefore, an issue mentioned in both primary and general election ads was referenced by a president 1.394 standard deviations more than issues not mentioned in the ads. When excluding budget, employment, and inflation references, each point increase in the ordinal variable leads to an increase in presidential references by 0.697 standard deviations, a value approximately equal to 47 presidential issue references. Using a more

President		Crime/Drugs	Defense	Employment	Health Care
Reagan	1980 Prim.	-0.44	0.36	-0.18	-0.71
	1980 Gen.	-0.61	-0.10	1.04	-0.61
	1981 Agenda	-0.65	1.03	-0.14	-0.55
	1984 Gen.	-0.58	0.95	1.49	-0.76
	1985 Agenda	-0.44	2.16	-0.37	-0.61
G.H.W. Bush	1988 Prim.	-0.44	0.36	-0.18	-0.71
	1988 Gen.	1.95	0.77	0.17	-1.01
	1989 Agenda	1.61	1.51	-0.38	-0.75
Clinton	1992 Prim.	-0.64	-0.64	1.16	0.20
	1992 Gen.	-0.38	-0.63	1.93	0.06
	1993 Agenda	-0.52	-0.35	0.37	2.35
	1996 Prim.	0.96	-0.75	-0.69	2.55
	1996 Gen.	1.79	-1.00	-0.08	1.35
	1997 Agenda	0.54	0.39	-0.49	0.24
G.W. Bush	2000 Gen.	-0.51	-0.51	-0.54	-0.34
	2001 Agenda	-0.14	2.08	-0.89	0.89

Table 5: Z-Scores for Candidate/Presidential Attention to Selected Issues

precise ordinal measure in which 1 point equals a 5 percentage point increase in references to an issue in primary or general election ads, OLS regression analysis indicates that a 1 point increase on the ordinal measure leads to an increase in presidential references by 0.193 standard deviations, a value approximately equal to 12 references.

Although presidential agendas do not necessarily reflect the individual content of primary or general campaign ads, these findings suggest that the year-long campaign effort – consisting of both the primary and general ad campaigns – bears a significant relationship to presidential agendas. If a candidate references an issue in both his primary and general campaign ads, he is very likely to direct attention to it as president. On the other hand, many issue references in primary or general campaigns may indeed be responses to individual political events or other candidates’ messages rather than true reflections of presidential priorities. These findings suggest that major proposals are discussed throughout the electoral process and become important elements of a president’s first-year agenda.

Electoral Dynamics and Campaign/Presidential Issue Consistency

Empirical findings also support the hypothesis that closer elections are related to weaker campaign/issue agenda relationships. Stronger candidates stay focused on a message, while trailing candidates or candidates in a close election change messages between the primary and general campaigns and reference issues unimportant to their planned presidential agenda in the hope of increasing support. Among the campaigns

studied, Reagan’s 1984 general election ads, excluding employment, budget, and inflation appeals, have the strongest correlation – a stunning 0.950 – with presidential issue references. By contrast, almost no relationship exists between G.W. Bush’s general election appeals in 2000 and his presidential agenda, yielding a correlation of 0.143 with a significance of 0.713. Such observations support the hypothesis that closer elections lead to a lower relationship between ad appeals and presidential agendas. Indeed, a correlation of 0.900 with a significance of 0.015 exists between a successful candidate’s share of the two-party vote and the consistency between his general election ad appeals and presidential agenda, exclusive of budget, inflation, and employment appeals.

Regression modeling, moreover, indicates that 76 percent of the variation in the general election/first-year agenda correlation (y) can be explained by the victor’s share of the two-party vote (x) with the equation: $y = -4.310 + 0.09x$.

These findings support the conclusion that leading candidates can stay more focused on their true issue priorities, while trailing candidates shift campaign messages away from their actual issue priorities in an effort to win support. These results, however, must be interpreted with caution, as they only include references to nine issue areas and only cover six elections.

Consistent with these findings, the winner had a higher correlation between general and primary ad appeals than the losing candidate in each election studied. Among all the ultimately successful candidates, the primary-general ad correlation is 0.647, still significant at the 0.001 level.

Campaign/Presidential Treatment of Owned Issues

A comparison of the relative attention that presidents devoted to specific issues on the campaign trail and in the White House supports the hypothesis that parochial policies may be top priorities in a president's first year in office even if such issues were not stressed in ads. In Clinton's 1992 campaign, for example, the number of health care references was only 0.06 standard deviations above the median number of issue appeals for the issues under examination. During his first year in office, however, his number of references to health care was 2.35 standard deviations above the median number of references to examined issues.

During their first year in office, presidents may seek to please the interest groups that helped elect them. Clinton's first year in office exemplifies this pattern. Clinton campaigned as a fiscally responsible, tough-on-crime, socially moderate "New Democrat," but in 1993 he called for the admission of homosexuals into the military, advocated tougher gun control legislation, worked to overhaul the nation's health care system, and imposed higher taxes. Presidents may also focus considerable attention on issues that were important in their campaigns. In the 1988 campaign, for instance, George H.W. Bush devoted considerable attention to crime and drugs, much of it in the form of attack ads against Michael Dukakis, including the infamous "Revolving Door" ad. Bush, however, devoted comparable degrees of attention to the crime issue in office and during the campaign. This observation is reasonable, for crime and law-and-order issues may generally be more appealing to a broad segment of voters than are massive tax cuts, socialized medicine, and substantial defense buildups.

Similarly, some performance-based issues receive more attention from candidates than from presidents. Candidates often campaign on economic issues, but a president may be unable to strengthen the economy. Applying the issue-ownership theory, successful presidential candidates focused most of the energies during their first year in office to fulfilling commitments on issues owned by their party. Republicans Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, and G.W. Bush focused on the Republican-owned issues of defense, crime, and taxes, while Democrat Clinton focused on one of his party's owned issues, health care.

Table 5 compares the z-scores of the attention Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush paid to selected issues in primary

and general campaigns and in the first year of each of their terms. Health care is a Democratic issue; defense and crime/drugs are Republican issues; and employment is a performance-based issue generally discussed by the party then enjoying an advantage on the issue.

This table illustrates trends relevant to the issue ownership theory. Presidents may give greater emphasis to their party's owned issues than do candidates, as demonstrated by references to defense issues. Performance-based issues, like employment, receive less emphasis from presidents than from candidates.

Conclusions

Although some continuity customarily exists between the primaries, general election, and the presidency, campaign issues generally can not serve as precise predictors of presidential priorities due to the often anarchic nature of politics and the differing political constraints of a candidate and a president. Electoral dynamics, moreover, affect the relationship between campaign appeals and presidential actions, with candidates in close battles referencing a greater number of issues they do not plan to make major presidential priorities. While these findings indicate that successful candidates often emphasize issues in office that differ from those in their primary and general campaign ads, this paper does not support the generalization that presidents flagrantly choose to violate their campaign promises or ignore their campaign messages. Indeed, empirical evidence affirms that a candidate's major themes – those issues referenced in both primary and general campaigns – receive considerably more presidential attention than do issues referenced in just one phase of the campaign.

Ultimately, political conditions beyond an individual's control may largely dictate the appeals made during a campaign and the policies pursued by a president. Although candidates may have some success priming voters to focus on a favorable issue agenda, they must also consider the larger political context and respond to pressing issues. Major events may allow a president to shift his issue agenda without incurring public criticism. George W. Bush, for instance, campaigned on domestic issues in 2000, even criticizing Clinton's efforts at nation building. Bush, however, received little criticism for attacking Afghanistan and establishing a new government in that nation following

the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Nonetheless, presidents remain accountable to the public. A president can not move his issue stance too far from his constituents' position without risk of a loss of support. Findings from the 1980s that presidents generally fulfill campaign promises also would be applicable to more recent administrations since all presidents face similar incentives for maintaining their promises. Perhaps even greater motivation exists with the development of the modern nomination system; it allows a credible challenge for the party's nomination to be made by a candidate frustrated with the incumbent president's failure to remain true to his convictions. Such challenges occurred in 1980 and 1992 when Presidents Carter and G.H.W. Bush faced opposition from more extreme elements of their parties. Rival parties and the news media also remind voters when presidents fail to act on their campaign messages.

This paper's findings indicate that a president follows his own agenda, at least in the first year of a term. This agenda is developed prior to his entry into the candidate field, but is referenced throughout the electoral process and is consistent with the objectives of partisan constituencies. Due to continually evolving electoral dynamics, a president does not necessarily prioritize issues based on the attention he gave them in the campaign.

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