Empirical Evidence For Dynamic Party Issue Reputations\textsuperscript{1}

Yujin Kim
University of Wisconsin-Madison
yjkim8@wisc.edu

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\textsuperscript{1}This is one of the chapters in my dissertation, not a stand-alone paper.
As discussed in the previous chapter, scholars have asserted that issue ownership remains stable over time despite the fact that the stability assumption in party issue reputations has hardly been subjected to extensive empirical testing. This chapter addresses this directly by analyzing a series of public opinion polls on party performance on 16 public policy issues over three decades. First, I explain the choice of survey questions and four measures of party issue reputations, and the technique to construct the series in measures. A discussion of the series will follow next.

**Measuring Party Issue Reputations**

Petrocik’s studies focus on explaining campaign strategies. He takes issue ownership as given and discusses how candidates sell those advantages to voters. Candidate advertisements and acceptance speeches serve his purpose well. This project, however, approaches the topic of party issue reputation from a different angle: how the public perceives and responds to party activities in the first place.

I suggest thinking of party issue reputations as *constantly being reformed*: they are not stable and permanent and instead, compared to the past, they can be reinforced, weakened, or remain the same. This approach calls for examining politics during governing periods as well as campaign periods. I do not use candidate advertisements, acceptance speeches, or party platforms to measure party issue reputations, as has been done in previous research (e.g., Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006). Instead, I analyze public opinion data to estimate trends in the policy image of parties, as subjectively perceived by the public. There are two types of public opinion questions about party issue reputations that might be used: the open-ended ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ questions toward parties (e.g., Geer 1991; Baumer and Gold 1995; Campbell et al. 1960; Sanders 1988; Brewer 2009; Wattenberg 1998) and issue-handling questions of parties (e.g., Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Pope and Woon 2009).

Existing research on party reputations have three data-related limitations: an
exclusive focus on campaign periods, no measure of relative issue advantage, and no
treatment for ‘house effects.’ First, studies on issue-specific reputations of parties
usually have a limited scope of research to campaigns and voting behavior (Norpoth
and Buchanan 1992; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Sellers 1998; Koch 2001; Simon
2002; Holian 2004; Kaufmann 2004; Sigelman and Buell 2004). Limiting the scope of
research to campaigning periods may provide a direct evaluation of Petrocik’s claim
that issue reputations are “tested and reinforced” (1996, 828). Yet, I argue that the
impact of a given issue in an election may be different from its issue reputation. For
example, if one party has a reputational advantage based on its perceived position, but
the people who give the issue priority - those who really care about the issue - take the
opposite position, the issue might work to the advantage of the party with the weaker
reputation when voters actually go to the polls. Therefore, examining only campaign
periods misses a bigger picture of how the public responds to events or institutional
activities on a day-to-day basis, during governing periods as well as campaign period,
and how the public perception evolves over time.

Moreover, previous studies in party reputation often adopted the open-ended
‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ questions toward parties found in the American National Election
Studies (ANES): “Is there anything in particular that you like (dislike) about the
Democratic Party (Republican Party)? (e.g., Geer 1991; Baumer and Gold 1995;
Campbell et al. 1960; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Sanders 1988; Wattenberg 1998;
Brewer 2009). These open-ended party likes/dislikes questions are advantageous in that
they capture both issue saliency and party strength. Yet, they have a notoriously low
response rate and the result is not representative of what the public thinks. Because the
questions are asked every two years, they are useful in understanding the issue
ownership during the campaign period, but do not give any information about
governing periods. They also fail to fully reflect the idea of issue ownership. The theory
predicts that a party pursues an electoral advantage by emphasizing advantageous
issues while downplaying disadvantageous issues to itself. To the small proportion of
respondents who give an answer to the party likes/dislikes question however, the issues
are salient already, but not because of the campaign. The question does not tell us about issues that are not mentioned. Pope and Woon (2009) note that this is like missing latent public opinion (Key 1961, 264-9). Last, but not least, the open-ended likes/dislikes question does not reflect the idea of relative advantage because it does not ask respondents to compare two parties on the same issue.

Issue-handling questions, on the other hand, do not suffer from the problems that open-ended party likes/dislikes questions present. Yet, previous studies utilizing issue-handling questions are not free of problems either. They typically analyze the data only for a limited time period and often ignore house effects (but see Sides (2006) and Goble and Holm (2009)). Each polling house has a unique procedure of surveying like sampling, which can contribute to systematic differences in survey results across different polling houses. Thus, a direct comparison of various surveys without dealing with house effects may produce a distorted perspective of public opinion. As is reported in the previous chapter, Petrocik (1996) uses a 1991 ABC/Washington Post survey, a 1991 CBS/New York Times survey, and 1988-90 Market Opinion Research surveys and claims that these polls reveal how voters perceive issue-handling reputations “during the last decade (831). Yet, it is arguable whether using these three surveys serves his purpose. More recently, Holian (2004) tracks issue-handling differentials over time, using a 1984 Black poll, a 1988 Harris poll, a 1992 Gallup poll, a 1996 Gallup poll, and a 2000 ABC News/Washington Post poll. Both Petrocik and Holian fail to take house effects into account.

This project uses issue-handling questions, but turns to the iPOLL databank at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research to get around the house effect problem. The iPOLL databank compiles American public opinion surveys conducted at the national level since 1935. The advantage of using the iPOLL databank is its accessibility and large array of questions for various issues over time. I was able to create a dataset by compiling issue-handling questions and trace trends in party issue reputation in 16 issue areas: abortion, budget, crime, economy, education, environment, foreign affairs,
gun control, health care, immigration, jobs, national security, peace, prosperity, social security, and taxes. In selecting these issues, I referred to previous research on party issue reputation to directly compare my findings with theirs. Therefore, most issues are either owned issues or performance issues (in Petrocik’s definition). Technically peace and prosperity issues are not public policy issues in that they are broad gauges of how the country is doing. While not directly comparable to other policy issues, I include them in the dataset because they help demonstrate overall public sentiment towards parties. Cultural issues are also included in the analysis to determine whether they behave differently in comparison with social or foreign policy issues. Abortion and gun control issues are chosen over other cultural issues, such as gay marriage and death penalty because they were asked about more frequently.

The number of polls available in each issue domain varies significantly: the most often asked question is about health care issues (268 questions), followed by taxes, social security, economy and education issues. To enable a time-series analysis in the following chapters, I ensured that each issue has been asked a minimum of one hundred times. Exceptions to this are some cultural issues of abortion, gun control, and immigration issues (51, 33 and 71 questions, respectively). As they are relatively new issues, their issue-handling questions have not been asked as many times as other issues. With the exceptions of environmental and prosperity issues, the period covered in this project spans from 1980 to 2009. \(^2\) I set this starting point because of the data availability. Several factors, including the number of available questions asked, the number of polling houses included, and the period over which they were asked, may vary across issues. Table 1 shows the summary statistics.

I use all the questions that would capture a subjective and relative evaluation of policy reputations of parties. Most of the questions take the form: “Which party do you think is better at handling ... issues, the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” I include questions with identical or similar wording to each other so that they are comparable to each other across time. For example, some surveys specifically compare

\(^2\)Environmental issue series begins from the year 1971 and prosperity issue series from the year 1944.
the President and Congress, such as this question: “Who do you trust do a better job handling education, George W. Bush or the Democrats in Congress?” (ABC/Washington Post Poll, July 2001). In contrast with other types of questions, which allow respondents to rely on their own issue criteria (regardless of whether they think specifically about the President, Congress, or any other source that they can associate with a party when they hear the question), these types of questions limit respondents’ discretion. Nonetheless, I tentatively include them in the analysis because the source of a respondent cue in evaluating a party’s policy reputation is not of major interest to this section. When I analyze the relationship between the elite and party issue reputations in later chapters, however, I do not include these questions in the analysis. In addition, I only utilize survey questions with national adult samples or national likely voters. Polls that oversample specific subpopulation (such as Hispanics and individuals over 50 years of age) are not used.

In addition, questions including choices about independent candidates or third parties are excluded. Although not plentiful, some questions around the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections allow Ross Perot or Ralph Nader as choices. As this project focuses on the two major political parties, however, I do not include those questions in the dataset.

**Measures**

For the purpose of this project, I will construct continuous measures of party trust on each issue. Following Pope and Woon’s recent study (2009), I adopt four measures to estimate the issue reputation of political parties: issue reputation of each party
(Democratic Reputation and Republican Reputation), Party Advantage, and Issue Differentiation.\(^3\) Firstly, I construct separate measures of issue reputations for the Democratic Party and the Republican Party by recording the proportion of the public who indicates one party to be better at handling an issue than the other. Each measure presents how Democratic or Republican issue reputations have evolved over time.

\(^3\)Pope and Woon (2009) call the same measures Democratic advantage and Partisan choice instead of Party Advantage and Issue Differentiation, respectively. I choose to change the names as here to clarify the meaning of the measures.
The *Party Advantage* measure is the percentage difference between Democratic responses minus Republican responses in survey questions (Democratic responses - Republican responses). This measure serves the idea of issue ownership well in that it captures the relative advantage enjoyed by one party over the other in a certain issue area, which the open-ended party likes/dislikes questions fail to do. A positive value of *Party Advantage* indicates that a plurality of the respondents indicated that the Democratic Party is more likely to address the issue, while a negative value means that the Republican Party is considered to be better at handling the issue. Thus, it is a measure that can easily tell which party ‘owns’ an issue. Or, it can display the existence of fluctuations in party issue reputations, if at all.

Lastly, *Issue Differentiation* measures the total proportion of the public that indicated that one of the parties is better able to handle an issue than the other (Democratic responses + Republican responses). While the *Party Advantage* measure is informative, the *Issue Differentiation* measure is needed as a complimentary measure because *Party Advantage* may miss underlying changes in party issue reputations. Suppose 30 percent of the public indicates that the Democratic Party handles an issue better, and 10 percent of the public indicates that the Republican Party handles the same issue best. As *Party Advantage* is 20 points, the Democratic Party seems to own the issue. Yet, it is dubious whether we can say that the Democratic Party owns the issue, when only 40 percent of the public indicated that either party is better at handling the issue. In this case, *Issue Differentiation* can be useful, as it prevents the misinterpretation of the data.

The *Issue Differentiation* measure is superior to an examination of the proportion of the respondents who selected “don’t know” or “neither” options because opinion polls often offer various options in addition to the two political parties. For example, one NBC/ *Wall Street Journal* poll from December 2004 asking competence of health care issues provides choices of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, both parties, neither party, and don’t know, while a Fox/Opinion Dynamics poll in March 2001 on the same issue allows respondents to select from the Democratic Party, the Republican
Party, both parties or don’t know. Yet another poll has two parties, no difference and no opinion/refused (Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, April 2002). Creating a measure for the proportion of the public who does not indicate either party can be tricky because it is difficult to determine which measures are commensurate. This lack of comparability and clarity is another reason why I employ the Issue Differentiation measure.

While the four measures may look simple or redundant, each measure is illuminating, especially when examining the trends over time. A hypothetical example in Table 2 illustrates this point. When Party Advantage moves up from 0 to 20 for an issue (from time 1 to time 2), does it mean that people have credited the Democratic Party more without changing their evaluations of the Republican reputation (scenario 1)? Or has the public lost confidence in the Republican Party over time when the Democratic reputation has remained at the same level (scenario 2)? Or it could be the case that both parties have experienced some changes in issue reputation. Scenario 3 demonstrates an example that Democrats have gained the issue reputation by 5 points and their counterpart has lost it by 15 points for the same period. In all three hypothetical cases, Party Advantage has increased by 20 points between time 1 and time 2, but the underlying story is qualitatively different. Thus, it is necessary to assess policy reputation, which examines the trends in the survey marginals of both parties separately, in addition to the Party Advantage measure. Moreover, Issue Differentiation measures change in all three scenarios, adding more insight to the dynamics in party issue reputations.

Methods

The dataset compiled from the iPOLL archive includes issue-handling questions from a variety of survey organizations. Among 16 public policy issue areas, party trust on health care issues has been asked by the most number of polling houses (34) while the question on gun control issues was asked by only 13 pollsters. Aggregating public opinion questions of this kind is fraught with difficulties. While issue-handling questions by different survey houses are supposed to measure the same concept, simple differences
in question wording, sampling, and other specific survey procedures by different polling houses can yield profound differences in survey responses. For example, a pollster’s specific sampling method or question wording could allow for a consistently higher or lower average, compared to other polling houses. In measuring a particular concept, if the intervals and frequencies across various surveys are the same, simply calculating their average would allow us to estimate a reasonable trend of party issue reputations. However, this is not the case: how long and often each polling house was in the field varies significantly. The specific survey methods and procedures each survey house adopts can contribute to the systematic differences in the underlying trend of survey questions, which are referred to as house effects. Accounting for these house effects is a major hurdle in correctly combining various opinion polls and extracting a single underlying trend.

This task can be accomplished in several ways. One of the most commonly used techniques in political science is James Stimson’s Wcalc procedure (1999) (e.g., Ramirez 2009; Keele 2007). Others adopt Simon Jackman’s Bayesian estimation, using Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) methods (e.g., Jackman 2005; Voeten and Brewer 2006). More recently, Goble and Holm (2009) adopted Charles Franklin’s semiparametric, iterative technique. Previous researchers show that these methods yield highly correlated estimates.4

To construct measures of party issue reputations, I make the day my basic unit of analysis and adopt Franklin’s technique because it does not impose strict restrictions on the theoretical model and allows for a flexible fit to the data.5 Yet, I make a slight change to Franklin’s technique by using an automated smoothing spline instead of a lowess (locally weighted regression) smoother with a span parameter.

A lowess curve estimates a smooth curve by using only a subset of raw data points around the point of estimation, as opposed to a classical linear regression estimating a

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4Goble and Holm (2009) find that the bivariate correlation among three methods is over .95 for the question on the Iraq War. Voeten and Brewer (2006) also report a similar finding in cases of presidential overall approval, war approval, and Iraq war support.

5Franklin’s analyses using the semiparametric, iterative technique can be found at the websites ‘Polls and Votes: http://pollsandvotes.com/PaV/’.
straight line that goes through the middle of all data points. The number of data points in this subset is determined by a span parameter or bandwidth and the data points in this subset are weighted in a decreasing proportion to their distance from the point of estimation. Therefore, a lowess curve is sensitive to selection of a span parameter and bandwidth. Beck and Jackman note, “based on our experience in applying smoothers in social science contexts, this choice [of the span parameter] is best dealt with on a case-by-case basis, informed by prior beliefs about the smoothness of the process being modeled and diagnostic plots of residuals for evidence of over- and underfitting” (1998, 608-9). Yet, the choice of smoother is fundamentally subjective in that the analyst has to decide the size of a span parameter, the number of knots or the degree of freedom for splines based on visual inspection, which is often a subject of criticism (Keele 2008, 119). Automated smoothing, however, avoids this problem because it allows the data to decide the amount of smoothing. Namely, by choosing an automated smoothing spline over a lowess with a span parameter, I allow for a more flexible fit with only minimal assumptions.

The basic steps of this adapted semiparametric, iterative technique are as follows. First, an automated spline smoother is fitted to the raw data points (left panel of Figure 1). The raw data are regressed on the marginals of the automated smoothing spline fit and dummy variables for each polling house, except the Gallup poll. An indicator variable for the Gallup poll is excluded because I set it as the baseline in estimating the trend in party issue reputations. Unlike election results, there is no benchmark that can guide party issue reputations and, therefore, we can never know the true measure of party issue reputations (Jackman 2005). I chose the Gallup as the baseline because it has conducted polls regarding party issue reputations more frequently and the intervals between polls are better spread out than other polling houses in most issues. Polling houses with fewer than two polls are classified in the

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6There is no clear norm in choosing between the start and the end dates of polls: I use the start date of polling in the analysis. With the exception of the American National Election Studies (ANES), most polls included in the dataset are conducted over a period of 3 days or less. Considering the period that I examine here is over 30 years, I believe the choice of the start or the end date will not make much substantive difference.
‘other’ category because a reliable house effect cannot be estimated in those cases.

The second step produces the first set of coefficient estimates for house effects. If there is no systematic bias in measuring party issue reputations, the coefficients for polling house indicators should be zero and the coefficient for the automated spline smoother one and the estimation stops here. Yet, this is not the case for most issues. For example, the Democratic education reputation example in Figure 1 includes 21 polling houses and the initial house coefficients range from -10.76 (Princeton Survey Research Associate/Newsweek Poll) to 2.12 (U.S. News & World Report Poll).

To take care of house effects, the two-step procedure above is repeated. I create an adjusted series by subtracting these house coefficients from the raw data and fit a new automated smoothing spline to this adjusted series (right panel of Figure 1). The adjusted marginals are regressed on the new smoother and house indicators. This is repeated until there is no systematic deviation from every polling house. That is, each house indicator coefficient approaches 0 and the coefficient for the spline fit is not significantly different from 1. In all four measures of 16 issues, I did not have to repeat this two-step procedure more than twice because house effects were taken care of in the first or second iteration. There were two cases in which I had a larger than 0 coefficient after the first iteration: polling houses with only a few surveys and ‘other’ category. This is because a small number of questions per survey house do not produce a stable house effect. Also, the ‘other’ category includes various polling houses and therefore, a large coefficient is expected. In theory, I can repeat the procedure until all the coefficients become 0. Yet, I found that the splines from more than two iterations are practically the same and I decided that it is reasonable to stop the iteration as long as the coefficients are not statistically significant. In the education example in Figure 1, house coefficients have become practically zero after the first iteration. In the second iteration most coefficient estimates were below .01 and two slightly larger coefficients were not statistically significant with large standard errors. As more iterations did not produce significantly different estimates, I stopped at the first iteration.
The Dynamics of Party Issue Reputations

Figures 2 through 17 present the four measures discussed above: Democratic and Republican Reputations, Party Advantage, and Issue Differentiation across 16 issue domains. In each figure, the upper left panel illustrates the trend of party issue reputations for each party and the upper right panel presents the Party Advantage measure. The lower left panel shows the Issue Differentiation measure.

To demonstrate the uncertainty in the series, I add the 95% confidence bands around each measure. It is important to be cautious in interpreting the beginning and end of the series. The data on either end of the time-series are typically scarce and both ends of the series have wide confidence bands. One survey can pull up or down the trend by an undue amount, which can invite a misleading interpretation. For example, in economy issues (Figure 5), there are only two surveys available before 1985. It seems like the Republican Party has enjoyed a huge reputational advantage until later in the 1980s, but the economy reputation trend looks different when these two surveys from the early 1980s are removed from the dataset. In gun control issues, after a decade of competition between the two parties, the Republican Party seemed to enjoy a clear advantage in the late 2000s, but only two surveys have been conducted since 2005, which found favorable results for the Republican Party (Figure 9). Although it might be true that gun control issues have become significantly pro-Republican around this time, we should be cautious in reporting the finding.

The graphs raise several illuminating points regarding party issue reputations. Each issue domain presents its own distinctive trend worthy of a detailed analysis and discussion, but this section focuses on some of the most noticeable points only. First and foremost, party issue reputations display great volatility over time. If the stability assumption holds true, we should expect all four measures for ‘owned’ issues to be relatively flat while those for performance issue reputations to be volatile. The prediction for performance issues finds support in the data. All measures for foreign affairs and economy issues do reveal notable fluctuations over time. Peace and prosperity issues, while not in Petrocik’s list, can be considered to be performance
issues and they display notable variation over time as well.

Contrary to the prediction of issue ownership, party reputations for constituency-based issues also present a considerable level of volatility even after house effects are taken into consideration. Parties have an advantage at one point in time as in the national security issues until the mid-2000s (Figure 13). Nonetheless, it cannot be assured that the advantage will continue permanently. The Republicans’ national security reputation demonstrates a sizable decline during the second term of the Bush administration. The magnitude of variation varies greatly across issues and measures and performance issues reputations do not seem to be more volatile than those of ‘owned’ issues. For example, the difference between all-time low and high is almost 25 percentage points for Republican budget reputations (Figure 3). For the Democratic abortion reputation, however, the difference is less than five percentage points (Figure 2).

The issue that most closely fulfills the expectation of issue ownership is jobs, as it shows the least variation among all issues (Figure 12). Spanning over three decades, jobs reputations for both parties are virtually unwavering until more Americans started giving credit to both parties in the 2000s. Yet, Party Advantage is practically flat, remaining pro-Democratic by about 20 points.

Secondly, Petrocik’s claim for issue ‘ownership’ does not always hold true. Some may argue that while party issue reputations are not entirely stable, the ownership of issues still does not change hands. Namely, even when we observe volatility in the issue reputation graphs (the upper left panel), Party Advantage (the upper right panel) might be consistently pro-Democratic or pro-Republican (from Petrocik). The Party Advantage measures for ‘owned’ issues indicate that this is not always the case, however.

An interesting point to note is the difference between ‘Republican’ and ‘Democratic’ issues. To illustrate, Democrats are always favored on Democratic issues whereas Republican issues seem more contested between the two parties. For instance, Party Advantage measures are always pro-Democratic in environment, health care, jobs, and social security issues throughout the entire period examined (upper right panels in
Figures 7, 10, 12, and 16). A majority of Americans have continued to trust Democrats more than Republicans in all four issues for the period examined. Education issues are slightly different from other Democratic issues. Public opinion seems deeply divided on education issues around 2002, perhaps influenced by the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Figure 6). Except for that period, however, the public has consistently trusted Democrats in effectively handling education issues. This asymmetry has not been acknowledged before my study.

The ‘Republican’ issues from Petrocik’s issue catalogue, on the other hand, seem to in fact be rather contested between the two parties. For example, the Republican Party’s ratings on handling budget issues seem solid in the early 1980s: a majority of Americans believed that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to make the right decisions when it comes to dealing with budget issues (Figure 3). This number dropped nearly 20 points between 1980 and 1993, with Republicans practically losing their budget advantage in the early 1990s. For the next decade the public seemed unable to universally agree on which party was more capable of handling budget issues. The Party Advantage measure fluctuated considerably, continuously moving between pro-Democratic and pro-Republican. The reputational gains and losses for Republican budget issues during the Clinton administration seem to be a reflection of the heated debates between President Clinton and the Republican Congress. During the Bush administration, the Party Advantage measure became increasingly pro-Democratic, reaching an all-time high at 20 percent in 2005. A dramatic increase in federal budget deficit seems to have eroded Republican budget reputation. Towards the end of the Bush administration, Democrats appear to be the stronger party on the issue.

Similarly, public trust in the Republican Party on crime issues does not seem to be deeply rooted (Figure 4). Overall, Party Advantage on the issue is pro-Republican spanning over three decades, but it is neither solid nor consistent. At several points in time the public was evenly split between the two parties, with the Republican losses coming during the Clinton administration. One interpretation for the variation might be President Clinton’s approach to crime issues. Clinton successfully introduced a new
dimension in discussing crime issues: crime prevention, instead of crime punishment. This could have contributed to Democratic gains and Republican losses in crime issue reputations (Holian 2004).

An interesting trend is observed in national security issues as well. As one of the Republican issues in Petrocik’s issue catalogue, it is expected that the *Party Advantage* on national security would be solidly pro-Republican. This was true until the mid-2000s. With some volatility, the pro-Republican advantage stayed around 30 percent for two decades or so, but poll readings present a more nuanced version of reality in recent years. The Republican advantage on national security reached an all-time high of mid-30s right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Yet, in the decade since this monumental event, public opinion on which party is better at handling national security issues indicates an increasing lack of confidence in Republicans’ abilities to address the matter. By the end of the Bush administration, the Republican Party practically lost its advantage on the issue. There appears to be increasingly negative attitudes regarding the Republicans’ handling of national security issues. While a more detailed analysis will follow in the next chapter, the public’s growing frustration of the way the Bush administration handled the Iraq war seems to have contributed to this dramatic decline in polls. Toward the end of 2009, the public began to restore its confidence in the Republicans’ handling of the issue. Yet, it is too soon to tell how the trend will move in the future.

As the theory of issue ownership predicts, the public does not universally agree on which party is better at handling performance issues, giving neither party consistent trust. Nonetheless, there is an interesting trend in performance issues: a growing advantage for the Democratic side. The public has become increasingly favorable towards Democrats in handling the economy over three decades (Figure 5). A Republican advantage in foreign affairs issues started weak in the early 1980s, but grew stronger for the next decade (Figure 8). The pro-Republican advantage on the matter persisted until 2005; the public has become increasingly skeptical of Republicans’ abilities to handle national security issues effectively. During the second Bush
administration, Democrats have gained ground on the matter.

Overall, it is striking how many issues are pro-Democratic and how few are pro-Republican. The Democratic Party had a congressional majority for 18 years of the three decades and held the presidency for 8 years. This means that electoral results have been more balanced than these measures would suggest. One possible interpretation for this might be that issue reputations are, on average, heavily influenced by the balance of party identification. Questions asking party identification have found that more people identify themselves as Democrats than Republicans for the same period. A more comprehensive analysis on this point will follow in Chapter 6. Or, as Petrocik (1996; 2003) suggested, it could also be that Republicans are just better at getting voters to prioritize issues where they are advantaged.

Thirdly, issue reputations of two parties do not always mirror each other. One party’s reputational gain is not necessarily translated into the other party’s reputational loss. If people were always changing their minds between two parties in evaluating issue performance, the Issue Differentiation measure would be flat because the sum of the respondents who favor either party should be the same. As the lower left panels in Figures 2 through 17 reveal, this is not the case. For instance, the Republican Reputation on social security issues indicates great variation since the late 1990s (Figure 16). The magnitude of gains and losses on the Republican side is around 10 points, but the Democratic Reputation on the issue remains fairly stable. Similarly, the changes in opinions regarding the Republican crime reputation are notable, characterized by the party continuously losing and gaining ground on the issue (Figure 4). The Democratic Reputation on the matter has slowly increased over time, but it does not show as dramatic variation as its counterpart.

Even when one party’s reputational gain occurs in conjunction with the other party’s loss, the size or duration of the shifts do not perfectly offset one another. During the late 1980s, the Republican budget reputations decreased by almost 20 points, while the Democratic Party’s reputational gain was less than 10 points (Figure 3). Comparatively, the Democratic loss and the Republican gain in education around 2002
are about the same size (Figure 6). The Democratic Party soon regained the reputation on education it had lost, but the Republican education reputation did not decay as quickly. Since 2002 the Republican education reputation has slowly eroded over time, but compared to the pre-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) period, a higher percentage of people remained favorable to the Republican’s ability to handle the matter.

The Issue Differentiation series in almost all issues appear to be rising over the last 30 years. In general, a greater proportion of the public chose to name a party to do a better job in handling an issue, rather than answering ‘don’t know’ or refusing to answer the question. Issue Differentiation in environmental issues displays the most dramatic increase by nearly 60 points for over the course of three decades (Figure 7). As reported earlier, however, scarce data for the early period of the 1970s might exaggerate the magnitude of change. A few exceptions to this slowly increasing trend are budget, economy, foreign affairs, national security, and prosperity issues (Figures 3, 5, 8, 13, and 15). Issue Differentiation in these policy issues do not improve consistently with a few periods of ups and downs. By 2009, however, Issue Differentiation measures in all 16 issues reach close to 90 percent or higher.

This aligns with the previous studies. Scholars found that the proportion of survey respondents who answered the open-ended party likes/dislikes questions has increased since 1980s (Brewer 2009). Moreover, it is consistent with other research on party polarization, which reveals that parties have become more internally homogeneous and differentiated from one another (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Hetherington 2001). Pope and Woon (2009) claim that this made it easier for the public to name which party is better at handling an issue. Yet, Issue Differentiation measures in this study go further: it is not just general polarization on a traditional left-right continuum, rather growing differentiation on specific issues. That is, Issue Differentiation measures increase even in policy issues that do not fall neatly on the left-right spectrum, such as crime and immigration issues, and even performance issues. This suggests that there is something more going on than just polarization.

Lastly, issues that should be similar, such as cultural issues, do not necessarily
behave the same way. The trends of abortion and gun control issues have nothing in common except that Issue Differentiation measures have increased over time (Figures 2 and 9). In addition, issues related to economic conditions, including the economy, jobs, and prosperity, reveal strikingly different trends (Figures 5, 12, and 15). That is, each issue-handling question appears to be tapping a different aspect of seemingly similar issues. The public uses different criteria in answering these questions. Jobs issues are an interesting case in that issue reputations stay remarkably stable over time, appearing not to respond to changes in the unemployment rate or any other economic indicators.

Conclusion

Analyzing an original dataset of issue-handling questions covering 16 policy issues for three decades reveals five illuminating points. First, party issue reputations are neither stable nor permanent and there exist strong temporal dynamics in party issue reputations, a realization not permitted by the existing theory of issue ownership. Second, the public trust on a party’s ability to handle Petrocik’s ‘owned’ issues is not consistent and solid. More ‘owned’ issues appear to be contested between the two parties than the issue ownership has predicted. This finding was more pronounced in ‘Republican’ issues. Thirdly, party issue reputations are not mirror images of one another in many cases. Fourthly, Issue Differentiation has risen over the last three decades. Lastly, party issue reputations in similar issues do not behave the same way.

The analysis of these 16 issues leaves much variation to explain. Some movements in party issue reputations are rapid while others are gradual. Some changes are durable while others are reversed repeatedly. The remainder of the dissertation investigates the sources of this variability. The next chapter introduces a dynamic perspective of party issue reputations. I hypothesize that the rise and fall of issue reputations in the eyes of the public is a response to elite behavior and media coverage. In the following two chapters I use education and terrorism issues as case studies to examine the interrelationship among them.
Table 1: Summary Statistics

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<th>N</th>
<th>Democrat (%)</th>
<th>Republican (%)</th>
<th>Democratic Advantage (%)</th>
<th>Partisan Choice (%)</th>
<th>Number of polling houses</th>
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Table 2: Hypothetical examples of Party Issue Reputations

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Figure 1: Semiparametric, iterative technique with an automated smoothing spline: Democratic education reputation example
Figure 2: Abortion

Legend:
- Red: Republican Party
- Blue: Democratic Party

Issue reputation (%)

Party advantage (%)

Issue differentiation (%)

Year

Figure 3: Budget

![Graphs showing issue reputation, party advantage, and issue differentiation over years for Republican and Democratic Parties.](image-url)
Figure 4: Crime

- Issue reputation (%)
- Party advantage (%)
- Issue differentiation (%)


Legend:
- Republican Party
- Democratic Party
Figure 5: Economy

![Graph of Economy]

- **Issue reputation (%):**
  - Republican Party
  - Democratic Party

- **Party advantage (%):**
  - Positive advantage:
  - Negative advantage:

- **Issue differentiation (%):**
  - Positive differentiation:
  - Negative differentiation:
Figure 6: Education
Figure 7: Environment
Figure 9: Gun Control

![Graphs showing trends in issue reputation, party advantage, and issue differentiation over years.](image-url)
Figure 10: Health Care
Figure 11: Immigration
Figure 12: Jobs
Figure 13: National Security
Figure 14: Peace

The figure illustrates the relationship between party reputation, party advantage, and issue differentiation from 1980 to 2000. The graphs show the percentage changes over time for the Republican and Democratic Parties. The x-axis represents the year, and the y-axis shows the percentage change in reputation, advantage, and differentiation.

- **Issue reputation (%)**
  - The red line represents the Republican Party, and the blue line represents the Democratic Party.
  - The data points are marked with circles, and the trend is indicated by the lines.

- **Party advantage (%)**
  - The data points are marked with orange circles.

- **Issue differentiation (%)**
  - The data points are marked with green circles.

The graphs demonstrate how the parties' reputations, advantages, and differentiation evolved over the years, providing insights into political dynamics.
Figure 15: Prosperity
Figure 16: Social Security

![Graphs showing issue reputation, party advantage, and issue differentiation](image)

- **Issue Reputation (%):**
  - Republican Party
  - Democratic Party

- **Year:** 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005

- **Issue Differentiation (%):**

- **Party Advantage (%):**

Figure 17: Taxes

![Graphs showing issue reputation, party advantage, and issue differentiation over years for Republican and Democratic Party.](image-url)
Bibliography


