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**THE REASONING VOTER MEETS  
THE STRATEGIC CANDIDATE**  
**Signals and Specificity in  
Campaign Advertising, 1998**

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Theories of voting suggest voters use shortcuts to minimize the costs associated with becoming informed about candidates' policy positions. Although there is much theorizing about how voters use cues, there is little empirical work on whether candidates send them. Data from advertisements run during the 1998 elections show that candidates do not often send obvious kinds of policy relevant cues—information about party and ideology. This analysis of advertising suggests that candidates send signals in strategic ways. They obfuscate to avoid being labeled a partisan of the less popular party, but they know when they are not well known enough (being a challenger) such that party may help people learn about them. In open primaries, candidates attempt to steal voters away from the opposing party by not explicitly mentioning their party or ideology but by talking about specific issue positions in hopes of attracting independent voters.

**Much has been made of the importance of cues, shortcuts, and symbols in electoral politics (Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991; Riker, 1988). Scholars have argued that voters, faced with decisions about political choices and burdened with imperfect information, rely on shortcuts to help them make reasonable choices. Who has not heard the story, memorialized in Popkin's book, about Gerald Ford? Ford mistakenly neglected to shuck his tamale at a San Antonio campaign visit and was forever labeled a candidate who did not understand the needs of Hispanic voters. Scholars (Popkin, 1991) have argued that even something as apolitical as ordering milk with a kosher hot dog (George**

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McGovern) or spelling potato incorrectly (Dan Quayle) can become a symbol that has deleterious effects. Most of the work in this area has concentrated on the ways that voters use symbols, shortcuts, and cues to reach decisions. This article, however, explores the preceding link—the ways in which candidates might strategically use symbols to send information to or guard information from voters during campaigns.

### THE PUZZLE

We have learned a good deal about why voters might use signals and shortcuts during campaigns (Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991). Among the most persuasive reasons for the use of shortcuts by voters are the large amount of information voters could gather about political choices and the scarce amount of time voters dedicate to amassing such information. As Schattschneider (1983) points out, political topics are complicated, there are too many elections, and most Americans are probably too busy working or raising their families to spend much time researching the positions of all the candidates for whom they could cast ballots. Given these parameters, using political symbols such as party or ideology to infer information about a candidate's policy positions seems reasonable. The incentives of voters are met through the use of shortcuts and cues.

And so it would seem for candidates as well. Their incentive, to win elections, may be best met if they can easily convey information to voters during a campaign—at least enough information so that voters can place them on a basic ideology or policy dimension.<sup>1</sup> If voters seem unable or unwilling to gather specific and voluminous information about candidates, then candidates who want to win elections should send shortcuts and signals that are easy and meaningful for voters to receive and digest. Without such behavior on the part of candidates, symbol-seeking voters are left with no meaningful cues from which to make inferences about candidate's policy preferences. The voter's job in an election gets harder when candidates do not send easy-to-receive political signals.

Despite compelling theoretical work on this topic, very little empirical work has been done on the questions of how voters and candidates use symbols during campaigns. The dearth of research in this area

may be due to the unavailability of data on both voter and candidate behavior. Presidential elections, for which we have abundant survey data, have low variability on candidate behavior in terms of numbers, strategy, and context. This makes it challenging to sort out the effects of candidate strategy on voters. In addition, election surveys, whether presidential or sublevel, are often designed before the campaign is in full swing. Because of this, specific questions that might illustrate a voter's response to a candidate's use of political symbols are not asked because survey designers do not know how candidates will campaign before the survey instrument is written and in the field. Even given the constraints that limit connecting candidate behavior to voting behavior at the individual level, most of the empirical work investigating arguments about the use of shortcuts in campaigns has focused on voters.

This analysis takes a small step toward shifting the empirical analysis on to the behavior of candidates in campaigns, with particular interest in uncovering the political and institutional factors that lead candidates to use political cues. Do candidates behave in ways that help voters minimize the costs of becoming informed during elections, or are there situations in which candidates do not want to make the voters' jobs easy? Are there conditions under which candidates may prefer to be unclear about their future behavior in office? For example, if poll results show candidates that their issue positions are unpopular among constituents, are candidates less likely to remind voters of this during a campaign?

In this article, I bring a unique data set of campaign advertisements to bear on these questions. The analysis uses data from 290 candidates running in 153 races across 37 states during the 1998 midterm elections. Of the 153 elections, 75 are primaries and of those, 35 are Republican primaries.<sup>2</sup>

### **THE CONCEPT OF CAMPAIGN CUEING, DETERMINANTS, AND MEASUREMENT**

Candidates have many ways of sending signals to voters during campaigns. One of the most effective ways for candidates to deliver an unfiltered message is with paid advertising. In the political spot, can-

didates present themselves to voters in a strategic manner without obvious interference from journalists or pundits. Thus, it seems as if campaign advertisements might be a good place to start looking for strategically placed campaign signals.

What kinds of signals might be particularly useful to voters in elections? Signals that help voters make sense of their choices would be best, at least from the standpoint of voters' utilities. Both Downs (1957) and Popkin (1991) suggest partisanship and ideology are useful references for voters. The long-standing importance of party identification to the vote choice has been well documented by political researchers (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Converse, 1966; Converse & Markus, 1979; Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Markus, 1982; Markus & Converse, 1979; Miller, 1991). Although the importance of ideology has been less clear (but see Converse's [1964] seminal work), Popkin argues that

Parties use ideologies to highlight critical differences between themselves, and to remind voters of their past successes. They do this because voters do not perceive all the differences, cannot remember all the past performances, and cannot relate all future policies to their own benefits. (p. 51)

In a campaign that may cost millions of dollars, the dissemination of these quick signals is a great value. If candidates want to win elections and realize they need to send policy-relevant information to voters to do so, they should be sending signals about their partisanship and ideology.

Candidates, however, may also want to send signals that are not directly related to policy. Jamieson (1992) has detailed a number of ways in which the image audio, and visual aspects of advertising can work in concert and lead voters to draw certain kinds of inferences from ads. For example, candidates may want to appear with children in their advertisements to signal a concern for education or that they care about the future more than the present. Candidates may want to appear with their families in ads to suggest to voters that they have mainstream values. Candidates may use a technique called *morphing* to melt the image of their opponents into other unpopular politicians. This is perhaps another way for candidates to remind voters about past

failures and likely future performance, as Popkin (1991) suggests. Finally, candidates may use frightening music or background noise in advertisements as a cue that an opponent is “scary” or would be dangerous if elected. All of these types of cues—verbal, audio, and visual—may be important to voters, and political scientists know very little about how candidates use them.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, if candidates are not sending effective shortcuts and cues to voters in campaigns, maybe they are actually discussing policy information in a detailed and specific way. Although not a shortcut at all, this kind of information may be the most valuable to voters because it does not require them to make inferences from a symbol or cue about the candidates’ actual policy positions. If theories of candidate behavior and voting behavior are correct, there may be very little specific policy discussion in advertisements compared to the more general discourse about party and ideology.

It is likely that there will be variation on the use of signals or issue specificity by candidates during their campaigns. It is also likely that this variation is not randomly assigned, making it possible to identify systematic circumstances that may affect candidates’ behavior. What kinds of things might drive whether candidates use these cues in their advertisements? The following features of elections, political environments, and candidates may affect to what degree competitors send signals about their partisanship and ideology.

*Constituency partisanship.* Scholars studying Congress have shown a clear link between constituents and elected officials (Arnold, 1990; Bianco, 1994; Fiorina, 1974; Fiorina & Rohde, 1989; Jackson, 1974; Kingdon, 1989; Mayhew, 1974). It is not so odd to apply this literature to the relationship between constituents and legislative candidates. Candidates for Congress care about the partisan leanings of their constituencies because these are the people who will elect them. Consider two candidates for the U.S. House in an open seat. One might conclude that both candidates, being unknown to voters, should send party cues at every opportunity. But if the district in which they run is heavily Democratic, then the Republican candidate may want to avoid sending partisan signals in order not to alienate potential independent or moderately Democratic voters. In a closely contested district with an even party split, neither candidate may want to talk about

his or her partisanship. Thus, constituency partisanship affects candidates' strategies in terms of how likely they are to discuss their partisanship with voters. Candidates in congruent partisan districts should be more likely to send party signals in their discourse. It also seems to follow that these candidates should be more likely to discuss specific issue positions in their advertisements as well, because they have some assurance that the majority of their constituents share their overall political leaning. I suspect these data will show that candidates with constituencies similar in partisanship to their own will use issue positions as well as party and ideological cues more frequently.<sup>4</sup>

*General versus primary elections.* Because primaries are intraparty contests, one might expect to see less party cueing among candidates. It is possible, however, that candidates in a crowded primary field want to accomplish nothing more than being considered a part of the choice set for that election, in which case a candidate would signal his party frequently. It is clearer to see how ideology may be used in primary elections, as elite factions of the party often battle over political grounds. It seems likely that ideology may be very helpful in primary elections in particular.

*Open versus closed primaries.* An open primary is a primary in which voters can cast votes for different parties for different races (blanket primary), a primary for which the voter can declare partisanship at the polls (no prior party registration necessary), or one in which independents can vote on a party ballot (semi-independent primary).<sup>5</sup> Elisabeth Gerber and Rebecca Morton (1998) have investigated the effects of different direct primary systems on the representativeness of elected officials at the subpresidential level across the United States. They find that openness can undermine party-dominated electoral competition, leading to more candidate-centered and nonparty competition as voters use mechanisms other than party labels to coordinate their choices and form electoral coalitions. This, coupled with previous work on crossover voting (Abramowitz, McGlennon, & Rapoport, 1981; Hedlund, 1978) leads me to suggest that candidates are less likely to signal party or ideology in open primaries and more likely to discuss issues specifically.

*Incumbent candidates versus challengers.* Another explanatory factor is a quality of the candidate—incumbency. Incumbents may not be as likely as challengers to send party and ideological cues due to their ability to claim credit or take positions on issues, as Mayhew (1974) suggests. Incumbents may also use advertisements as an effective way to foster Fenno's (1978) "presentation of self" or Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina's (1984) "personal vote." They may also wish to encourage retrospective voting among voters—encouraging voters to reward them for a job well done (Fiorina, 1981). One might also expect to find more precise issue discussion in incumbent advertising, as they may claim credit and take positions more than challengers.

*Female versus male candidates.* Kim Kahn (1994) suggests that female candidates are often working hard to establish credibility in a male-dominated race. This being the case, female candidates should take advantage of credible signals such as party affiliation or ideology and forgo images of children in their ads to convey political messages. Female candidates also should focus their advertising discourse on specific policy content as they are "working hard to be taken seriously."

The advertisements in these data provide necessary variation in types of race (House, Senate, or Governor), election (primary or general, open or closed primary), candidate (incumbent or not, gender), and electoral condition (constituency partisanship is similar to candidates, dissimilar to candidates, or evenly balanced).<sup>6</sup> Of the candidates in these competitive races, 20% are incumbents, 44% of the candidates competed in primary elections, and 42% of the primary candidates ran in open primaries. Each office is well represented in the data; House candidates comprise 41% of the entire data set, gubernatorial candidates 37%, and Senate candidates 22%. The party split is closely balanced—Republicans make up 47% of the data.

There are many ways to determine whether candidates mention party in their ads given these data. The most obvious way would be to have one ad per candidate, watch it, and record whether it contained the cue. These data, however, contain all the ads made by the 290 candidates under study; thus, some candidates have only one ad in the data set, whereas others have several. Of the candidates under investigation, 33% made only one ad. Most made only one or two. Some,

however, such as Chuck Schumer (NY-SEN) and Gray Davis (CA-GOV), made more than 15 ads.

One way to measure party mentions with this type of data would be to calculate the percentage of the ads that mention party for each candidate. Although intuitive, this operationalization is problematic for the candidates who only make a few ads. For example, if 8 of Schumer's 17 ads mention party, he would get nearly 50%. If one of Joe Malone's (MA-GOV) two primary ads mentions party, he also gets 50%. These cases do not seem entirely similar, as one might expect to eventually see a party signal simply with an increase in the number of ads made.<sup>7</sup>

To get around this problem, I have operationalized the dependent variables, specifically party (or ideological) mentions, by recording whether the candidate mentioned party at all—in any of his or her ads. This operationalization produces a dependent variable for which 65% of the candidates never mention their party in any ad they make.<sup>8</sup> The same thing is done for specific issue content and the other dependent variables.

### THE CONTOURS OF ADVERTISING CONTENT

Most of the advertisements contain discourse on both traits and issues. Roughly 87% of all the ads in the data set contain a trait mention. Only 30% of the ads were predominantly trait based.<sup>9</sup> Generally, advertisements contain between one and three trait mentions. The most frequent trait mentions include those dealing with accountability, integrity, being a “family man,” and having children (more than 70% of the candidates made at least one ad with this claim). Most ads are a relatively balanced mix of trait and issue claims.

Nearly all the candidates also mention issues in at least one of their advertisements. Of all the ads in the dataset, 87% contained an issue appeal, and 52% of the ads were predominantly issue driven. Most issue-driven candidate advertisements contained only one or two issue mentions. The New York Senate race was unusual in this regard, with Al D'Amato and Chuck Schumer running advertisements containing upwards of 10 issue mentions each. In general, the data show the popular issue mentions to be taxes, the economy, crime, and edu-

cation. More than 53% of the candidates made at least one advertisement discussing taxes, whereas nearly 60% mentioned education at least once. Among candidates who made issue advertisements, only 32% made at least one ad that could be classified as positional in nature.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of the advertisements was mainly promotional (64 % of the advertisements were aimed at promoting a candidate's issue position or good qualities). Contrasting one candidate's positions or qualities to another made up 20% of the advertisements, and purely attacking the opponent's positions or qualities made up 16% of the advertisements. There were no systematic relationships between the tone of advertisements and the content (not all the attack ads were issue based, for example).

Of the ads, 82% had musical backgrounds in them and in 15% of those ads, the music changed suddenly in the middle of the ad (signifying a change from "good" music to "scary" music.) Nearly a quarter of the advertisements actually morphed an opponent into someone unpopular (mostly Democrats morphing their challengers into Newt Gingrich). In addition, 58% of the morphing ads had sudden music changes, confirming Jamieson's (1992) claim that the audio and visual aspects of ads can work in tandem to cue voters.

### THE USE OF PARTY AND IDEOLOGY AS SIGNALS

Do candidates take advantage of all the information loaded in the quick party or ideological cue, as Downs (1957) and Popkin (1991) predict? Table 1 presents tabular results showing a modest lack of party and ideological cueing in midterm campaigns. The most common type of party signal is the written mention of a candidate's own party in an ad, but even so, only slightly more than 25% of the candidates aired an ad with this type of signal. Candidates seem to be talking about their own party (or appearing with their party elite) more than anything else, and when they choose to signal their opponents' leanings, they most often talk about their ideology instead of party.

An example of such behavior would be candidates promoting their own moderate positions and then talking about their opponents' extreme "liberal" ideas on the same topic. Guy Millner, the Republi-

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage of Candidates Who Mention Party or Ideology**  
**in at Least One of Their Advertisements, 1998 (N = 290)**

<i>Type of Mention</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Candidate's party—written	25.35
Candidate's party—verbal	20.49
Candidate's ideology—written	4.51
Candidate's ideology—verbal	9.38
Candidate with party elite	17.36
Opponent party—written	3.12
Opponent party—verbal	4.86
Opponent ideology—written	4.86
Opponent ideology—verbal	6.25
Opponent with party elite	6.94
Any party mention (candidate or opponent)	32.99
Any ideological mention (candidate or opponent)	13.54
Candidate or opponent with elite party member	21.88
Total party, ideological, or elite signals	48.61

can candidate for Governor in Georgia, used as his campaign slogan, “Roy Barnes—Too Liberal for Georgia.” This slogan served to highlight his opponent’s leftward-leaning positions on issues.

Even when all of the possible ways that candidates can use party signals are combined, only 33% of the candidates made at least one ad containing some type of party cue. Even fewer candidates (13%) relied on ideology to convey information in their ads. Nearly 22% of the candidates used a party elite in their ads.

These data suggest that more than half the candidates never mention their party or ideology in any ad in any manner. One may be surprised by this ratio; however, one thing that makes the lack of partisan cues contextually compelling is the use, by 73% of the candidates, of another signal—the state in which the race is being held. Much like the party cue, the name of the state in which the race is run can appear on the screen at the end of an ad. Similar to party, it is inexpensive to do this but dissimilar to party, it does not present obvious policy-relevant information to voters, except in multistate media markets. Some candidates even use the name of the state in their slogan; for example, one of the candidates for Governor in Kentucky used as his slogan “Kentucky Pride for Governor.” This sentence sounds strange

out of context, but it is clear that what it means to convey is that this candidate understands Kentucky—that this candidate is proud of Kentucky just like all the voters out there are proud of Kentucky—presumably because he himself is from Kentucky and is just like all the Kentucky voters. This signal illustrates candidates' belief in a voting mechanism that Popkin (1991) calls representativeness or “the tendency to imagine whole people from specific traits and isolated observations of character” (p. 76). Unlike mentioning a state of residence, using party or ideological labels at the end of an ad does encourage the voter to draw a clear distinction between candidates—and this is possibly why some candidates do it and others do not. I turn now to a more systematic examination of the determinants of cueing.

Results of probit analyses presented in Table 2 suggest which, if any, of these institutional and political factors influence the use of different types of cueing in campaign advertisements. The table contains estimates for the variables of interest as well as several control variables, such as the office for which the ad was run (House, Senate, Governor) and a variable controlling for the total number of ads a candidate made during the election cycle. It is the case that the more ads a candidate makes, the more likely voters are to observe a party or ideological signal; however, the increase in probability associated with this effect is relatively small compared to the other variables of interest.

The results in Table 2 confirm the notion that all else being equal, the partisanship of candidates' state or district influences the decision about whether to use party or ideology as a cue in an advertisement. When the candidates' partisanship is similar to constituents' partisanship, the candidates are 18% more likely to signal party in an ad. Under similar conditions, candidates are 9% more likely to signal ideology. Candidates are strategically guarding the use of party and ideological symbols when they believe they may be hurt electorally by such information. The direct effect of constituency partisanship suggests that all else equal, candidates are less likely to signal their party in Democratic districts and states. Although this result gives pause, there are several possible explanations. Most obviously, with cross-sectional data, one wonders about year-specific effects. Uncertainty about the eventual outcome of the impeachment process may have led candidates, regardless of their party, to signal partisanship less in Democratic districts than they otherwise would have.<sup>11</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
**The Effects of Institutional and Political Factors on Party Cues, 1998**

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Specific Issue</i>			
		<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Kids</i>	<i>Morphing</i>
Incumbent					
Coefficient	-.80*	-.14	.40*	.04	-.33
SE	.24	.24	.20	.25	.21
dF/dx	-.24	-.03	.12	.01	.13
Primary election					
Coefficient	-.45*	.11	-.10	-.18	-.67*
SE	.18	.22	.22	.19	.20
dF/dx	.16	.02	-.02	-.05	-.26
Open primary					
Coefficient	-.17	-.16	.43*	-.12	-.45*
SE	.17	.20	.20	.18	.19
dF/dx	-.06	-.03	.12	-.03	-.17
Republican					
Coefficient	.03	.99*	.01	-.04	.19
SE	.16	.21	.19	.17	.18
dF/dx	.01	.23	.004	-.01	.07
Democratic leaning district and/or state					
Coefficient	-.41*	-.10	.14	.18	-.24
SE	.16	.18	.19	.17	.18
dF/dx	-.15	-.02	.03	.04	-.09
District and/or state leaning similar to candidate's party					
Coefficient	.47*	.40*	-.30	.59*	-.17
SE	.20	.24	.27	.24	.24
dF/dx	.18	.09	-.07	.13	-.07
Female candidate					
Coefficient	-.35	-.18	.50*	.76*	-.04
SE	.24	.28	.24	.28	.24
dF/dx	-.11	-.04	.15	.15	-.02
House election					
Coefficient	-.19	.16	.64*	-.19	-.10
SE	.19	.23	.26	.20	.21
dF/dx	-.07	-.03	.17	-.05	-.14
Senate election					
Coefficient	-.31	.06	.24	-.14	.22
SE	.22	.26	.26	.26	.24
dF/dx	-.10	.01	.06	-.03	.08
Total ads aired					
Coefficient	.11*	.13*	.24*	.31*	.19*
SE	.02	.03	.03	.06	.04
dF/dx	.04	.02	.06	.08	.07

(continued)

TABLE 2 Continued

Dependent Variable	Party	Specific Issue			
		Ideology	Content	Kids	Morphing
Music change in ad					
Coefficient	—	—	—	—	1.09*
SE					.21
$dF/dx$					.41
Constant					
Coefficient	-.72*	-1.30*	-2.32	.13	-.56
SE	.27	.24	.37	.30	.29
Pseudo $R^2$	.13	.18	.28	.20	.33

NOTE:  $N = 290$ . Cell entries are probit coefficients.  $dF/dx$  = the change in probability for indicator variables, calculated as the discrete change in probability of observing a 1 on the dependent variable for a change in the independent variable from 0 to 1, holding all other variables at their means. For nondiscrete variables, the change is calculated as the average change in probability associated with a unit change in the independent variable.

\* $p < .05$ .

Candidates are 16% less likely to mention their party in primary election advertisements compared to general election ads. This is perhaps because in many instances, there is only one party primary occurring in a state during a given race or perhaps simply because a candidate gets more leverage out of the party signal in a general election in which meaningful distinctions can be gleaned about the opponent from the party label.

Incumbents tend to send party signals 24% less often than challengers do, presumably because they are well known enough within their constituencies that voters are familiar with their partisanship. Republican candidates tend to signal ideology 23% more often in advertisements than Democrats do. This may be a by-product of an effect from the 1988 presidential debates in which George Bush dubbed liberal as “the L word” and created the connection that “being a liberal” was akin to being something undesirable. It is the case that among Republican candidates, most of the ideological references were aimed at their liberal opponents (as opposed to highlighting their own conservatism).

Whether a primary was open or closed did not have any influence on the use of party or ideological cues. The lack of an effect for open primaries is somewhat counter to Gerber and Morton’s (1998) claim

that openness undermines the centrality of party in electoral competitions. It seems quite possible that candidates still cue their party in open primaries (as much as they would in closed primaries, which admittedly is not likely to be very much) to get the attention of voters within their own party, although as Gerber and Morton argue, voters may rely less on party cues in open primaries.

One possible conclusion from these findings is that in some cases, specifically when their constituents are mainly of the opposite party, candidates are trying to make it more difficult for voters to make policy-informed decisions or to learn policy information during the campaign. To further test this, the systematic determinants of the use of specific issue rhetoric in advertisements are presented in the third column of Table 2.

Incumbents are 12% more likely to use specific issue rhetoric in their advertisements than are challengers. This can be explained by the nature of incumbent campaigning—retrospective voting and claiming credit for all the good things that “I’ve done for you lately.” Although incumbents cue party less frequently, they talk about specific issues more in their campaigns. Mayhew’s (1974) theory explains this best—incumbents take credit for what they have done, which means being specific about policies.

The analysis also shows that female candidates are 15% more likely to use specific issue rhetoric in their ads despite the fact that they are no more likely to use party or ideology as a direct signal in their ads.<sup>12</sup> This is somewhat in keeping with Kahn’s (1994) work on the subject that suggests female candidates are often working hard to establish credibility in politics; perhaps the seriousness associated with talking about issues in detail portrays female candidates as more credible than if they merely called themselves partisans.

The most compelling finding from this analysis of specific issue discourse is that open primaries lead candidates to make issue advertisements with more positional appeals. If the rationale regarding intraparty primaries is correct, then the open primary—which is not an intraparty contest—should engender more positional advertising as candidates go to some length to distinguish themselves from candidates of other parties running for the same position. This finding becomes even more interesting when coupled with the other findings

from Table 2, which reported that open primaries did not lead to an increase in party or ideological mentions in ads.

Open primaries are encouraging candidates to make specific positional advertisements but not to show their party or ideological affiliation in an ad. This seems logical, in keeping with conventional wisdom, and consistent with Gerber and Morton's (1998) work on the topic. If a candidate wants to "steal" a partisan voter from the opposition party, he or she is more likely to do so by using issue positions (veiled party references) instead of party labels (a direct party reference). A Democratic voter may hear a Republican primary candidate talking about improving education through teacher testing and not realize this is a code word for antiunion activity. This Democratic voter is more likely to make the "mistake" of voting for the Republican if the candidate talks in these terms as opposed to flashing the word *Republican* on the screen—which is likely to turn off the Democratic voter immediately.

There is another possible interpretation of these findings. It is possible that in open primaries, candidates target certain populations within the electorate to form a winning coalition. For example, in the 2000 New Hampshire primary, John McCain may have been expressly targeting independent voters and leaning partisans, whereas George W. Bush may have been aiming to mobilize the base Republican voters. There may be characteristics of the candidates that dictate how they campaign in an open primary setting.

One way to test this hypothesis is to assume that more ideologically extreme candidates might try to mobilize the base voters, whereas ideologically more moderate candidates may target independents or weakly committed partisans. If this is the case, the extremists would use party and ideology more frequently in their advertisements.

Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal political organization, rates members of congress on a 0 to 100 point ideology scale. Higher ratings mean more conservative voting records in the U.S House or Senate. By supplementing this dataset with ADA scores for the candidates who won their elections in 1998, I can get a sense for which candidates in the data set were more or less ideologically extreme. Tests for independence between ideological extremity and mentioning party (or ideology) in open primaries are not encouraging.

There seems to be no relationship between ideological orientations and whether a candidate delivers this kind of cue in an open primary. Similarly, when added to the parametric analysis, the ideological characteristics of the candidate have no systematic effects on cueing.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, as mentioned previously, nearly 70% of all the ads have children in them. Candidates, however, appear more likely to put kids in their advertisements if they are in politically friendly districts and if they are women. Women are 15% more likely than men to make at least one ad with children in it. The other measure of visual cueing used here was morphing. Changing an opponent's face into an unpopular politician's face right on the screen happens less frequently in primaries and specifically less in open primaries than in general elections, which makes sense because a candidate would probably not want to insult a member of his own party in this way. This is consistent with the lack of party and ideology signaling in open primaries. If an advertisement contained a change of music, it was 41% more likely to use the morphing technique as a visual cue than if the music did not change.

### **ACCOUNTING FOR CONTEMPORANEOUS AND COMPETITIVE EFFECTS**

One final determinant of whether candidates use party or ideological signals in campaigns may be whether their opponents are doing it. Often, studies of campaigns find it difficult to measure the competitive nature of elections because the effects of each campaign may be canceled out. For this particular analysis, this problem does not arise as I am more concerned with the determinants of candidate strategy rather than the effects of it; however, some interesting questions along these lines can be answered.

Are candidates in elections more likely to mention their party or ideology when their opponents do so? Are they more likely to be drawn into a discussion about specific issue positions if their opponents are taking positions on issues? In short, is there much interplay between the candidates in an election?

In general and primary elections for both parties, candidates are no more likely to mention party or ideology when their opponents are

doing it. Similarly, candidates are no more likely to take specific positions on issues if their opponents have done so. There seems to be much less rhetorical back and forth during campaigns than conventional wisdom suggests. This finding is consistent with other work on congressional races that finds candidate discourse about issue topics does not overlap between competitors in elections but instead shows high correlation between members of the same political party across all races (Spiliotes & Vavreck, in press).

## CONCLUSION

Only one third of the candidates in the 1998 midterm elections used their party label directly in advertisements. Given the interest in symbols, cues, and shortcuts in the voting behavior literature in American politics, this value requires contemplation. Candidates are sending party signals because they are instrumental and strategic. They obfuscate on purpose to try to avoid being labeled as a partisan of the “less popular” party, but they seem to know when they are not well known enough (being a challenger) such that a party mention may help people get to know them. Moreover, in the crowded multiparty fields of open primary elections, candidates realize that they can steal voters away from the opposing party by not explicitly mentioning their party. Candidates can win open primaries by using positional issue discourse in advertisements in the hopes of gaining support from independent voters who may be attracted to the candidate’s positions or out-partisan voters who may not realize the candidate is from the opposing party. Even holding constant the instrumental factors that lead to increased use of party signaling, party as a cheap (does not take long) and effective (many voters can make party distinctions) means to convey information about policy preferences is used sparingly and strategically by many candidates, whether directly or indirectly.

Candidates behave strategically in their campaigns—this may not seem like new information to the recreational political observer; after all, pundits and consultants have been talking for years about the battle of strategy in elections, and reformers lament the fact that journalists cover campaign strategy more than substance. But political science and communications scholars have been slow in finding evidence of

systematic strategic behavior in campaigns mainly because data on candidate behavior in campaigns have been elusive; moreover, isolating the effects of campaign behavior among voters is difficult due to the contemporaneous, competitive, and cumulative nature of campaigns. Midterm elections provide a unique opportunity to study campaign strategy and discourse rich in contextual variation.

The next step in this research agenda is to connect the various strategies among candidates to unique effects among voters. For example, given the results presented here about open primaries, one could investigate at the individual level whether voters in open primaries use issue positions more in their voting calculus than voters in closed primaries; the challenge is obtaining nuanced individual-level voting data from states with different primary systems.

It is also possible, however, that all the cleverness among candidates about when to guard and when to disclose partisanship or specific policy positions has no bearing on people's voting decisions in off-year elections. The fact that voters can always read the party of the candidate on the ballot may make the strategizing about disclosing party during the campaign moot. Most voters, however, do not make up their minds in the voting booth; thus, the study of candidate behavior in campaigns and the discovery that some candidate behavior may be intended to make voting decisions more challenging for citizens is compelling—especially in light of recent research in political behavior that heralds the role of shortcuts and symbols as economical tools voters often use.

#### APPENDIX A Summary Statistics for Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Party mention in at least				
one advertisement	.35	.47	0	1
Ideology mention	.18	.38	0	1
Show kids	.71	.45	0	1
Morphing	.42	.49	0	1
Incumbent	.19	.39	0	1
General election	.44	.49	0	1
Senator	.21	.41	0	1
House	.41	.49	0	1

## APPENDIX A Continued

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Republican	.47	.50	0	1
District and/or state party lean	.01	.54	-1	1
Open primary	.47	.50	0	1
At least one positional advertisement	.22	.41	0	1
Female	.15	.36	0	1
Candidate and district and/or state have similar party	.18	.38	0	1
Total ads made	3.46	3.26	1	22
Music change in ad	.28	.45	0	1

## APPENDIX B

## Notes on Sampling and Representativeness of Data

These data were gathered by Strategic Media Services of Alexandria, Virginia, for *The National Journal*. The collection of data began 26 weeks before the general election. The data are a strategic sample of advertisements from competitive elections. *The National Journal* deems elections competitive if they are open seats, the incumbent is vulnerable to challenge, a challenger is of high profile, or vote margins in previous elections have been close (Todd, 2001).

The average vote margin for the congressional elections in this data set is 13% (12% standard error). The average vote margin for all contested congressional elections in 1998 is 36% (20% standard error). It seems that Strategic Media Services did a good job of targeting competitive races.

The selection of these competitive races should not be detrimental to the analysis, as this does not amount to selecting on the dependent variable (mentions of party, ideology, or issue specificity). It is possible, however, that competitiveness might be correlated with the dependent variable such that in competitive races, candidates care more about their strategy and may be more or less likely to signal party, ideology, or issue positions because of this. If it is the case that competitiveness is correlated with the dependent variable, then finding effects in this sample on an independent variable representing competitiveness (for example, the balance of partisanship in the district) would be quite difficult as there would be no variation on the independent variable to produce a pattern of results with the dependent variable. The fact that constituency partisanship does have strong effects in this analysis suggests that even among these competitive races, some are more competitive than others. For example, in these data, vote margins range from .1% (Kentucky and Nevada Senate elections) to 75% (Massachusetts' 8th District). This variation arises from the fact that Strategic Media Services collected both primary and general election ads for the sampled races even if only one of those elections was deemed competitive. For example, the Massachusetts

8th District Congressional race is in the sample because the Democratic primary was highly competitive. The general election was not so competitive, but the ads were still collected. There is a wide range of vote margins on election day in this data set, and there are systematic factors that are able to predict when candidates will send partisan signals. The strategic sample of ads makes it more challenging to find this effect because it essentially limits the variation on an independent variable—competitiveness—not on the dependent variable.

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## NOTES

1. The debate over whether more information is always better is a puzzle about which I will remain agnostic. I do assume, however, that a candidate who sends absolutely no information to voters about his or her political preferences (or things that seem to signal political preferences) cannot win an election. Obfuscating may be helpful in some campaigns but in the limit, an information vacuum seems counter-productive.

2. These data were generously provided by Charlie Cook of *The National Journal*. For complete descriptions of the data set and sampling method, please see Appendix B. For a list of cases in the sample, please contact the author.

3. This analysis focuses mainly on the use of political cues such as party and ideology; however, results are presented for visual cues as well. There is much less theoretical work to guide the analyses of visual use of children or morphing in ads; thus, these analyses are undertaken primarily in a descriptive and exploratory fashion.

4. As a measure of constituency partisanship, I calculated Bill Clinton's share of the 1996 two-party presidential vote for each district or state under investigation. The mean of this calculation is .55 (Clinton won in this sample, on average, with 55% of the two party vote), and the standard deviation is .08. To calculate constituency leanings, I measured deviations from this sample mean such that districts or states with positive values lean toward the Democratic Party and vice versa. Districts or states that were one standard deviation above or below the mean were considered to "lean" in the appropriate direction. Several methods could be used to measure whether the district or state's constituency had similar partisanship as the candidate. I thank a reviewer for suggesting a very simple operationalization of this concept. Put simply, this analysis employs a variable charting the similarity of candidates' and constituencies' partisanship. When these things match, the variable is coded as 1. When they are dissimilar, the variable is coded as 0. This constrains the effect of party congruence between voters and candidates to be the same for both parties, but I see no a priori reason this should not be true.

5. Open primaries are held in Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. These data were acquired from The League of Women Voters. The data are for 1998 primaries and were last updated May 29, 1998.

6. See Appendix A for information about the distributions of these variables.

7. For example, if there is some ex-ante probability that a candidate will mention party in an ad, one is more likely to observe this phenomenon if the candidate makes 100 ads as compared to 2.

8. I have done these analyses using several alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable. The substantive findings do not change. Alternative approaches included using the ad as the unit of analysis instead of the candidate, thereby not accounting for the bias possibly provided by candidates who contribute more ads to the data set, and using proportion of ads that mention party as the dependent variable. Operationalizing the dependent variable as I have here also renders somewhat less important the question about when and how frequently these ads were aired. Although advertising buy data are available for these ads, the cost is prohibitive—roughly \$1,000 per media market. It would certainly be valuable to know whether the ads with party mentions were aired more frequently than those without party mentions; however, for this analysis, the question of interest remains whether the candidates made any ad at all containing party cues.

9. An ad is predominantly trait based if more than half of its claims are about candidate traits.

10. I coded issue claims for their level of specificity following Stokes (1966) and Geer (2000). Claims are either valence or positional. A valence claim is a general statement of policy or principle to which voter opposition is highly unlikely. For example, a candidate who says, “I want to improve education” is making a valence claim. In contrast, a candidate who says, “I want to improve education by starting a state lottery to fund smaller class size” is making a positional claim.

11. Another possible explanation is more systematic. Perhaps there is something about the voters in heavily Democratic districts or states that makes party less relevant than other cues candidates might give, such as race or union membership.

12. Allowing female candidates to have different effects depending on their partisanship did not make a difference. For example, Republican women do not signal their party more than Democratic women do.

13. This is admittedly not the best test of this hypothesis because it uses only those candidates who won their elections in 1998 (ADA scores are not available for the losers because they did not go to Congress).

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