

Measuring Changes in American Party Reputations, 1939–2004

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Scholars increasingly emphasize that party reputations are valuable electoral assets. The authors measure temporal change in the parties' relative reputations across several distinct policy areas and find that each party tends to have advantages on certain issues but that the patterns are far from permanent. Democrats have strong advantages on social welfare issues, but Republicans have made some gains. Republican advantages on taxes and "law and order" have been weaker. The authors also find that party competition has strengthened impressions of the parties. Results support the notion that parties carry a collective—if occasionally transitory—reputation on a host of issues.

Keywords: *political parties; reputation; competence; issue ownership; public opinion; aggregate survey data*

According to the issue ownership theory of elections, the relative reputations of the two major political parties matter because candidates have an advantage when their party "owns" the set of issues that voters are concerned about on Election Day (Petrocik 1996).¹ Democrats are usually viewed as better handling social welfare and civil rights issues, while Republicans are typically seen as better able to deal with "law and order" and national defense. But we do not expect reputations to persist indefinitely, nor do we expect the public to universally agree on the parties' issue-handling abilities. How strong are the parties' relative reputations? What proportion of the public thinks that either party owns an issue at all? And how have these aspects of the parties' reputations changed over time?

In this article, we address these questions by presenting and analyzing new measures of the parties' relative reputations by issue and over time. Our measures are constructed by aggregating survey questions from many different public opinion polls, and our work differs from previous analyses of party evaluations that heavily rely on the open-ended party "likes" and "dislikes" questions of the National Election Studies (NES) (Baumer and Gold 1995; Campbell et al. 1960; Konda and Sigelman 1987; Nie, Petrocik, and Verba 1976; Sanders 1988; Wattenberg 1984). For example, Geer (1991, 1992) uses the NES open-ended data to trace changes in party evaluations from 1952 to 1988 on a range of issues and finds that the Democratic Party

remained favored on most New Deal social welfare issues but that the Republican Party gained on economic ones.

The primary limitation of using the NES open-ended question is that it captures the opinions of only respondents for whom an issue is already highly salient—that is, respondents who offer comments about an issue without being prompted. This is problematic in light of issue ownership theory because (according to the theory) an issue's *electoral* salience is endogenous to candidate behavior. That is, candidates seek to raise the electoral salience of issues owned by their party and to lower the salience of issues owned by the other party (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996; Simon 2002). Thus, it is important that we measure the parties' relative reputations among the public as a whole to fully assess the *potential* advantage that candidates would gain by emphasizing an issue. This conception of the potential advantage that may be harnessed by strategic candidates is similar to Key's (1961, 264–69) idea of "latent public opinion." In other words, if we measure reputations using only open-ended questions, it is likely that we will fail to accurately capture the full extent of this latent opinion, which is a problem of selection bias.

Authors' Note: The order of the authors' names is deliberately alphabetical. We thank the Department of Social and Decision Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University for providing financial support.

Our measurement of party reputations uses exactly the same type of data as Petrocik (1996). He uses ABC/*Washington Post* and CBS/*New York Times* surveys to measure perceptions of issue ownership and shows that Democrats are favored on social issues, such as education and protecting disadvantaged groups, while Republicans are favored on a range of issues, including crime, moral values, defense, foreign policy, and taxation. His data from 1988 to 1991 are clearly time bound and do not permit any analysis of the dynamics of party reputation. Our analysis therefore extends the picture of party reputations and issue ownership to a longer period and permits analysis of the dynamics of that concept.

Finally, our data also speak to questions about the effect of elite polarization on perceptions of issue ownership. Poole and Rosenthal (1997; also see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006) very clearly document the increase in ideological polarization among members of Congress, and Hetherington (2001) shows that increased congressional polarization leads to increased clarity in public perceptions of the parties. With our data, we can examine the extent to which this increased clarity is general or issue specific.

Data and Measures

We constructed a data set from aggregate responses to survey questions contained in the Roper Center's extensive iPoll online database. After an initial examination of the availability and coverage of questions about how the public views the major parties with respect to different issues, we determined that the most consistently asked question is of the following form:

Which political party, the Republican or the Democratic, do you think would do a better job of dealing with each of the following?

The question is then followed by the mention of a specific issue or set of issues, such as unemployment, health care, the environment, or the deficit. We sought to maximize the number of survey items in our data so that we could measure party reputation across as many issues as possible and for as long a period as possible. This also allows us to combine surveys within any given period for more accurate readings of public opinion. We therefore did not restrict our attention to any single survey organization.

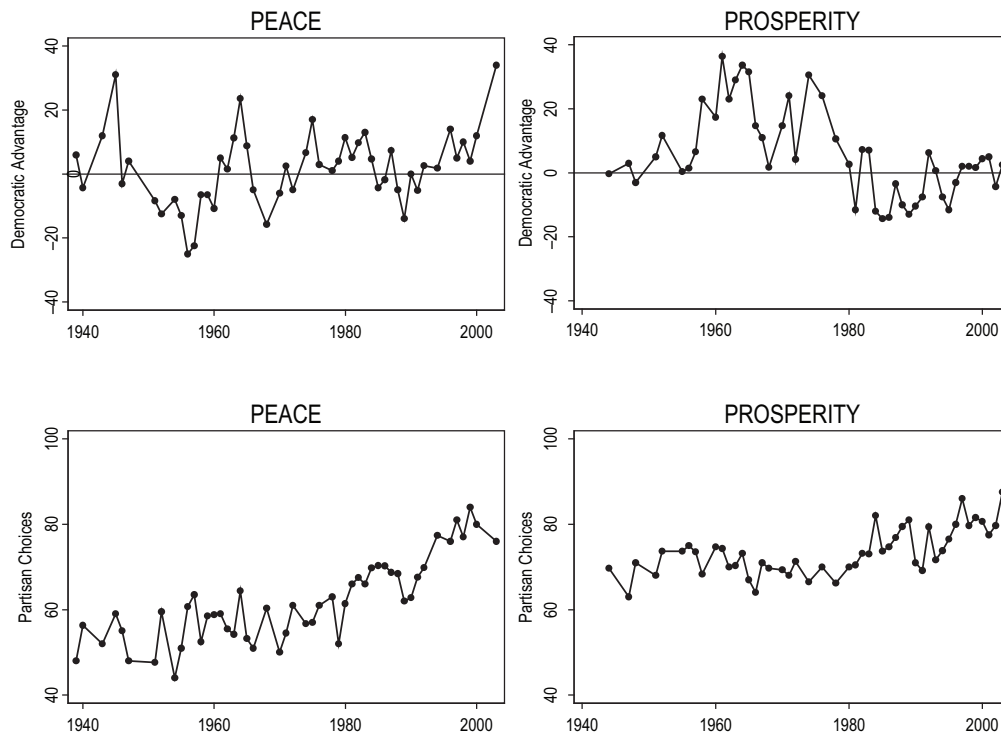
However, to carefully measure the same concept over time, we imposed consistency criteria on our selection of questions. The question above represents the most

frequent type of item tapping party comparisons, and it has two characteristics that we determined were necessary for an item's inclusion. First, we use only questions that ask respondents to choose which party "would do a better job," which therefore provide an overall comparison with respect to *performance* on a specific issue. We excluded similarly worded questions that asked for a comparison of policy positions. Second, we include only questions that refer to the two parties in a generic sense ("Democrats" or "Democratic Party" and "Republicans" or "Republican Party"). We exclude questions that refer to specific institutions (e.g., Congress, House, or Senate) or subsets of party members (e.g., presidents, candidates, or party leaders). Third, since our objective is to measure reputation in terms of issue ownership theory and the potential advantage that a party may receive from emphasizing an issue, we required that the sample of respondents be representative of the entire public (i.e., the national adult population) rather than a narrow subset of people who view an issue as highly salient. This is in contrast to previous analyses of party perceptions that rely on the open-ended NES "likes-dislikes" questions.²

We collected questions about a wide variety of issues, though some of them are not asked consistently across the entire period (reflecting the judgment of the survey organization about the important issues of the day). In this article, we examine eleven of the most frequently used issues. The issues of peace and prosperity—two standard Gallup Poll questions—are the most frequently asked and cover the longest period. They are also broad issues that tap what we expect to be citizens' notions of government's role in society. The most frequently occurring issue is prosperity, which refers to questions that asked which party is more likely to "keep the country prosperous." We found 186 separate polls including this question, with at least one poll in each of forty-eight years during the period 1944 to 2003. The peace issue is the second most frequent, and it refers to which party is more likely to "maintain peace" or "keep the country out of war."³ We identified 164 separate polls including this issue, with at least one item in each of fifty years during the period 1939 to 2003.

We computed two measures to describe the public's perceptions of the parties. Our raw data consist of two variables, Democratic and Republican, which represent the percentage of respondents (i.e., survey marginals) who chose the respective party as better capable of handling the issue.⁴ To capture the difference between the two parties, we calculated the net *Democratic advantage* (percentage of Democratic responses minus percentage of Republican responses). When this variable is

Figure 1
Democratic Advantage and Partisan Choices over Time (Peace and Prosperity, 1939–2004)



positive, the Democratic Party has the better reputation, and when it is negative, the Republican Party has the better reputation (on the specific issue). The magnitude of this variable therefore measures the degree of a party's reputation advantage in terms of the excess share of respondents who favor that party on the issue. The second variable is the sum of Democratic and Republican responses, which we label *partisan choices*. This measures the *total proportion* of the public that chooses one of the parties as better able to handle the issue. In other words, it captures aggregate perceptions of party differences on specific issues.⁵

Democratic Advantage

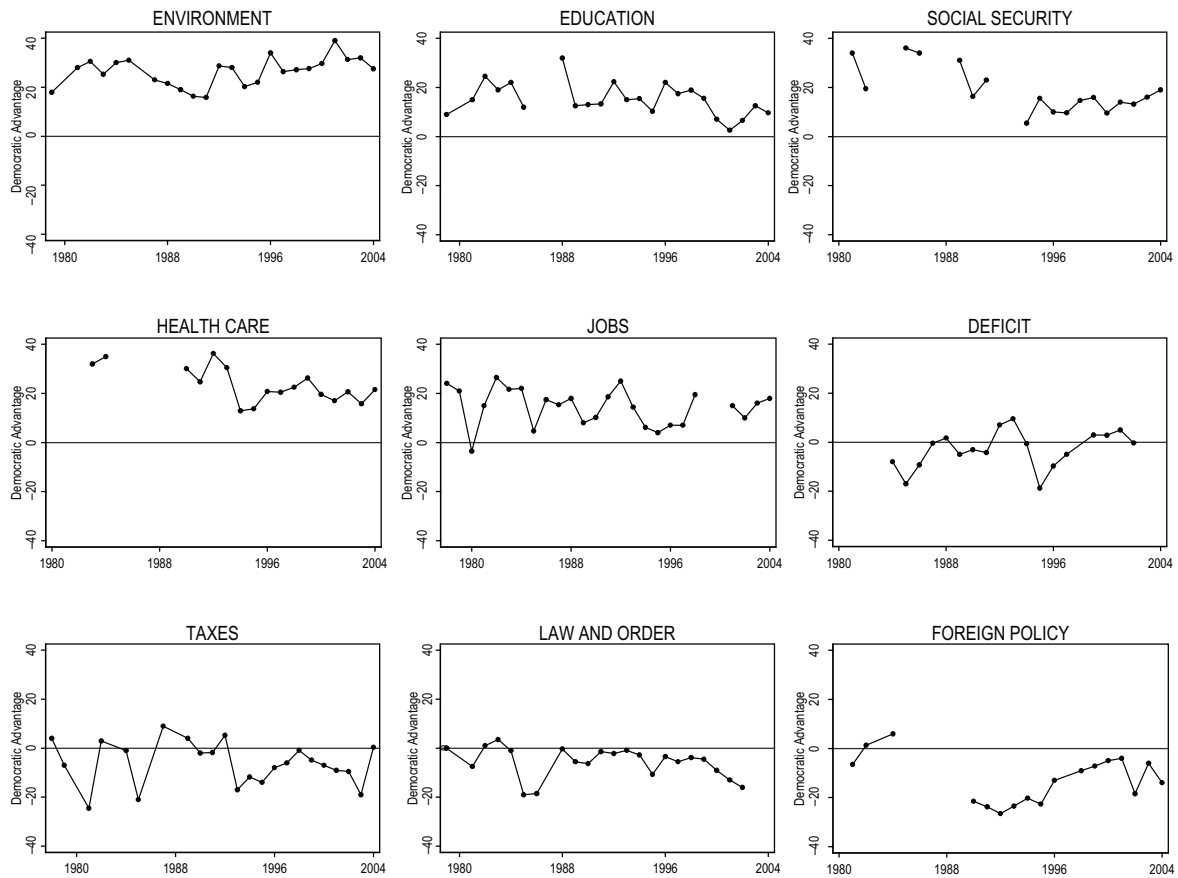
To examine trends in the public's relative evaluations of the parties, we make a year our basic unit of time and aggregate the data by calculating the mean of our observations within every year for each issue.⁶ The yearly aggregated data set has 316 year–issue observations from which we create two time series (one for each variable) for each of our eleven issues.

The upper half of Figure 1 plots the Democratic advantage over time for the two issues where data are

available as far back as the 1940s: peace and prosperity. The advantage for the peace series swings back and forth between the two parties throughout the entire period, with a dramatic increase in the Democratic advantage at the end. The prosperity series displays a different pattern. The series begins with Democrats and Republicans neck and neck at the end of World War II, followed by a period of Democratic dominance (with Republicans pulling even a couple of times), then a more moderate Republican advantage in the 1980s and early 1990s, and ending with parity at the beginning of the new century. Overall, both series appear to be relatively volatile, and we conclude that neither party owns either issue for the entire sixty-year period. This is consistent with the characterization of peace and prosperity as performance issues.

Figure 2 presents the Democratic advantage series for the other nine issues beginning in 1978 (since data are not consistently available for these issues prior to that year). There is some volatility in these latter series, but it tends to be much less than for peace and prosperity. Democrats clearly own education, the environment, health care, jobs (which includes unemployment), and social security—with

Figure 2
Democratic Advantage over Time (Additional Issues, 1978–2004)



the exception of a single data point, the data for these series are positive and therefore indicate a Democratic advantage. Republicans tend to have an advantage on foreign policy, the deficit, taxes, and “law and order” (which combines questions pertaining to crime and illegal drugs). On foreign policy, Republican ownership begins in 1990 but has slowly eroded over time. Their ownership of the other three issues is somewhat tenuous, as the Democrats sometimes achieved parity or even held a slight advantage.

The upper panel of Table 1 provides an alternative view of the data for Democratic advantage. While the means and standard deviations largely support the above conclusions about issue ownership, the trend statistics and differences in means across the two periods (1939–1980 and 1981–2004) provide quantitative evidence regarding changes in reputation that may not be immediately apparent in the visual analysis.⁷ For example, although there is a shift from Democratic

dominance to a moderate Republican advantage on prosperity between the two periods, the Democratic advantage increased within each period. In addition, although Democrats solidly own education, health care, and social security, Republicans gained ground on these issues in the second period. This suggests that even though ownership of these issues may be largely based on constituency, performance may still play some part.

Although a complete analysis of the underlying causes of these changes is beyond the scope of this brief note, we investigated whether changes in reputation might reflect shifts in the electorate’s ideological or partisan preferences. Table 2 presents results from ordinary least squares regressions of Democratic advantage on year (to measure the time trend), Stimson’s (1999) measure of public ideological mood, and macropartisanship.⁸ We find that ideological and partisan preferences often do play a role in influencing the public’s perceptions of the parties’

Table 1
Summary and Trend Statistics for Democratic Advantage and Partisan Choices

	All Years				1939–1980				1981–2004			
	Mean	SD	Trend	n	Mean	SD	Trend	n	Mean	SD	Trend	n
a. Democratic advantage												
Deficit	-2.9	7.6	0.50	18					-2.9	7.6	0.50	18
Education	15.4	6.6	-0.21*	24	15	8.5		2	15.4	6.7	-0.49**	22
Environment	26.3	5.8	0.29*	24	18			1	26.7	5.7	0.23	23
Foreign policy	-5.6	13.9	-0.41**	28	5.1	12.7	-0.18	11	-12.6 ^{††}	9.7	-0.23	17
Health care	23.1	6.8	-0.07	20	21.0	5.0		3	23.5	7.2	-0.77**	17
Jobs	14.6	7.9	0.01	31	14.7	11.0	0.18	9	14.5	6.6	-0.25	22
Law and order	-5.3	6.2	-0.25*	24	-0.5	2.8		3	-6.0	6.3	-0.22	21
Peace	1.8	11.7	0.17*	50	-0.1	12.4	0.10	31	4.9 [†]	10.1	0.65*	19
Prosperity	5.7	13.6	-0.35**	48	14.3	12.2	0.44*	25	-3.6 ^{††}	7.5	0.43*	23
Social security	18.7	9.2	-0.88**	18					18.7	9.2	-0.88**	18
Taxes	-4.8	11.5	-0.05	31	-1.4	15.4	0.47	10	-6.5	9.0	-0.08	21
b. Partisan choices												
Deficit	70.1	7.5	0.54*	18					70.1	7.5	0.55*	18
Education	66.1	12.6	0.70**	24	46.0	7.1		2	67.9	11.3	1.24**	22
Environment	68.7	12.3	0.78**	24	46.0			1	69.6	11.5	0.62*	23
Foreign policy	65.7	11.1	0.23**	28	59.2	10.0	-0.68**	11	69.8 ^{††}	9.9	0.75**	17
Health care	68.6	8.4	0.47**	20	55.0	9.6		3	71.0	5.6	0.63**	17
Jobs	71.1	10.9	0.41**	31	58.1	6.2	-0.24*	9	76.3 ^{††}	7.3	0.72**	22
Law and order	56.5	12.3	0.89**	24	42.2	6.3		3	58.5	11.6	1.01**	21
Peace	61.8	9.6	0.44**	50	55.8	5.2	0.16**	31	71.6 ^{††}	6.3	0.72**	19
Prosperity	73.5	5.5	0.21**	48	70.1	3.2	-0.06	25	77.3 ^{††}	4.9	0.40**	23
Social security	76.0	8.3	-0.13	18					76.0	8.3	-0.13	18
Taxes	72.9	9.2	0.29**	31	63.4	5.0	-0.22*	10	77.4 ^{††}	7.0	0.14	21

Note: Trend statistic is the slope coefficient from regressing the variable on year estimated only when $n > 3$.
 *Trend significant at the .10 level. **Trend significant at the .05 level. †Difference in mean between 1939–1980 and 1981–2004 is significant at the .10 level. ††Difference in mean between 1939–1980 and 1981–2004 is significant at the .05 level.

relative issue-handling abilities, which is not entirely surprising given the close relationship among preferences, partisanship, and party evaluations. Both ideology and partisanship are positively related to Democratic advantage on peace, prosperity, education, and taxes. Partisanship is positively related to reputations on the deficit, jobs, and law and order.⁹ Ideology, as measured by public mood, is positively related to reputations on health care and, surprisingly, is negatively related to reputations on the environment.

It is tempting to conclude from these positive regression coefficients that our measures of party reputation are simple reflections of ideology and partisanship. There is no doubt that these factors play an important role, but we suspect the causal relationships are more complex and may run both ways (but this cannot be uncovered without a more detailed time-series analysis). Tellingly, the statistically significant time trends in Table 2 strongly suggest that

ideology and partisanship cannot be the entire story. This view is further suggested by the presence of several issues for which mood and macropartisanship are not significant correlates. Health care and social security are two highly partisan issues, yet the parties' reputations on these issues do not vary with the level of macropartisanship.

In sum, as Petrocik (1996) and others have suggested, each party is typically viewed as owning a different set of issues. Democrats tend to have advantages on social welfare issues such as education and health care, while Republicans have advantages on foreign policy and taxes. Ownership of handling peace and prosperity is temporary—more like leasing than owning—largely because these are performance-based issues, although many issues also reflect voters' underlying ideological and partisan preferences. But even constituency-based reputations are far from settled quantities, as Republicans' gradual gains on education, health care, and social security indicate.

Table 2
Estimated Effects of Time, Ideology, and Partisanship on Democratic Advantage

Issue	Period	Year	Public Mood	Macropartisanship	Constant	R^2	n
Peace	1954–2003	0.66** (0.11)	0.58* (0.33)	1.72** (0.35)	-1433.11** (226.43)	.53	42
	1981–2003	0.93** (0.40)	-0.28 (1.05)	1.07 (0.89)	-1887.09** (771.16)	.31	19
Prosperity	1955–2003	-0.03 (0.10)	1.61** (0.33)	2.61** (0.33)	-185.64 (217.87)	.77	43
	1981–2003	0.83** (0.18)	0.24 (0.48)	2.05** (0.41)	-1777.54** (350.94)	.67	23
Deficit	1984–2002	0.49 (0.28)	1.28 (0.95)	1.51* (0.76)	-1148.35* (571.61)	.38	18
Education	1981–2004	-0.51** (0.20)	1.15** (0.47)	1.37** (0.43)	875.96** (392.84)	.55	22
Environment	1981–2004	0.57** (0.20)	-1.00** (0.47)	0.16 (0.45)	-1058.41** (393.60)	.33	23
Foreign policy	1981–2004	0.41 (0.49)	-0.97 (1.16)	1.06 (1.26)	-835.32 (958.83)	.23	17
Health care	1983–2004	-0.91** (0.26)	1.29* (0.61)	0.98 (0.56)	1702.55** (520.02)	.60	17
Jobs	1981–2004	-0.22 (0.26)	0.88 (0.58)	1.17** (0.55)	324.94 (513.20)	.27	22
Law and order	1981–2002	-0.08 (0.21)	0.84 (0.60)	1.55** (0.47)	20.85 (404.43)	.43	21
Social security	1981–2004	-1.27** (0.27)	0.82 (0.72)	-0.77 (0.69)	2552.32** (511.41)	.65	18
Taxes	1981–2004	-0.44 (0.34)	2.27** (0.86)	1.71* (0.85)	640.71 (663.00)	.31	21

Note: Estimates are from ordinary least squares regressions, with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

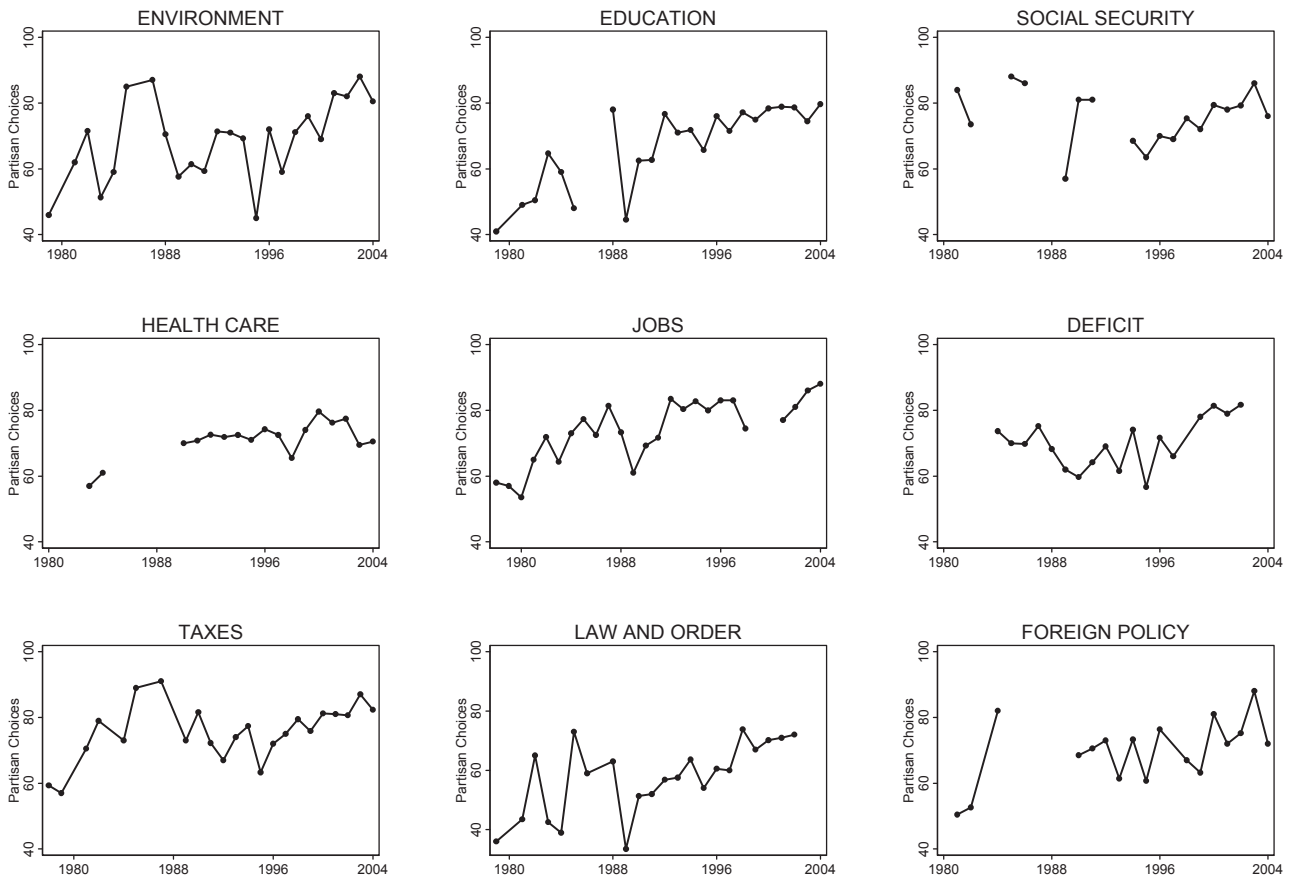
Partisan Choices

The bottom panels of Figure 1 present the data for partisan choices (the total proportion of the public that has chosen one party over the other) over the longer period on the issues of peace and prosperity. The series are clearly much less volatile than for Democratic advantage and display a clear upward trend, implying not only that more and more citizens are capable of distinguishing between the political parties on issues of peace and prosperity but also that they regard one or the other as better. Figure 3 displays the series for all of the remaining issues since 1978, which mirror the pattern for peace and prosperity. The series display strong upward trends following 1978, with social security as the lone exception to this rule. The statistics in the lower half of Table 1 generally confirm these patterns, especially for the post-1981 period, but also indicate that this resurgence in the importance of party reputations followed declines for some issues, such as foreign policy, jobs, and taxes.

Figure 4 superimposes the trend in Democratic and Republican Party unity scores against the trend in partisan choices for the prosperity series and suggests that the increase in partisan choices is correlated with the strengthening of party brand names within Congress.¹⁰ In other words, as the parties become more distinct, more voters can make distinctions between the parties and express a preference for one party's ability to handle an issue. Our findings therefore complement the work of Hetherington (2001), who finds that the public increasingly notices differences between the parties in response to elite cues. Where Hetherington finds this to be the case for general perceptions of the parties, we find an increase in partisan choices for a wide variety of specific issues.

In the post-World War II period, party competition appears to have strengthened "latent opinion" about party reputations and issue ownership. Even though only a small fraction of the public may view any one issue as highly salient, better than two-thirds or even three-fourths of the public prefers one of the two parties

Figure 3
Partisan Choices over Time (Additional Issues, 1978–2004)



on most of these issue areas. This is plausibly linked to congressional party polarization, although more work would need to be done to rigorously verify that hypothesis.

Conclusion

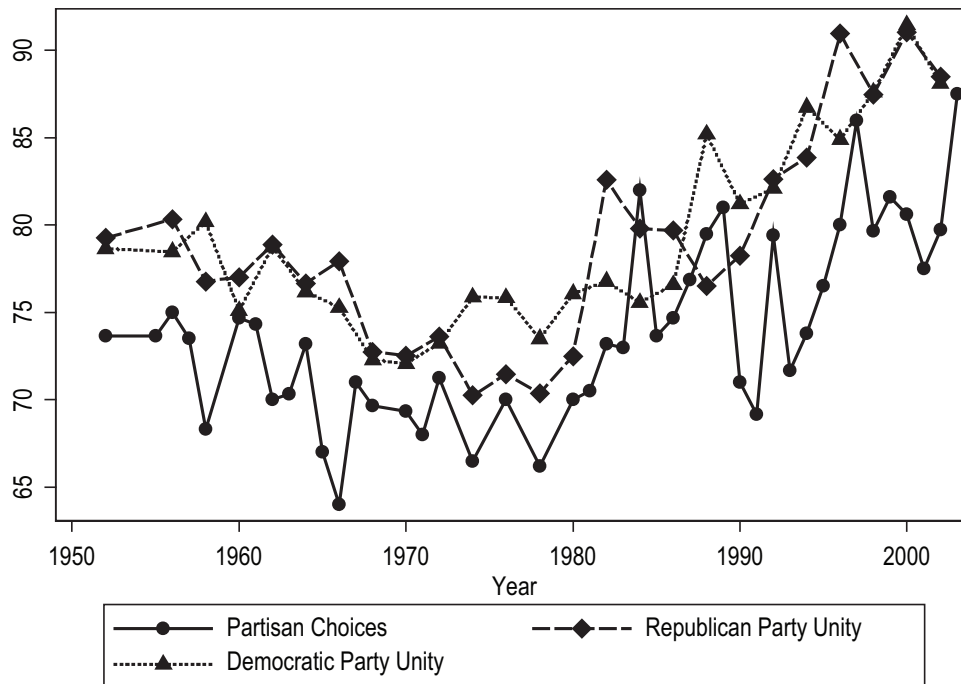
Petrocik's (1996) concept of issue ownership should resonate with anyone who follows politics: Republicans are hawkish tax cutters, and Democrats are guardians of the environment and social security (among other things). Individual politicians always display more nuanced positions, but these generalizations are useful and often accurate. Despite the benefits of generalizations, their accuracy cannot be guaranteed forever. Realignment scholars such as Sundquist (1983) and Carmines and Stimson (1989) illustrated that the party coalitions are not constant but change through time. Thus, we should not be surprised to find similar temporal dynamics with respect to party reputations—because

of both changes in the party constituencies and public evaluations of the parties' performance.

Parties that have a significant advantage at one point in time—such as Democrats on economic prosperity in the 1960s—cannot be assured that the advantage will continue indefinitely: the Democrats lost their advantage on prosperity during Carter's presidency. Recent years have also seen Republicans eat into Democratic advantages on education, health care, and social security (although the public still clearly prefers the Democrats on each of those issues). In recent years, Democrats have made gains on the performance-based issues of peace and prosperity, but the dynamics documented here clearly show that neither party can feel that they safely own an issue in the long run.

The emergence of unified, polarized congressional parties has happened concurrently with a general increase in the number of citizens who see clear differences between the parties. This trend suggests an increasing potential for party reputations to matter in

Figure 4
Trends in Partisan Choices and Party Unity (Prosperity Series Only)



Note: Party unity figures are for the House only. The partisan choices series for prosperity is measured annually, but party unity is measured per Congress.

American politics: the advantage in public opinion means more when a greater share of the public perceives the difference between the parties. “Responsible party government” implies parties that are punished or rewarded based on their performance. Our data regarding the dynamics of party reputations therefore support the notion that parties carry a collective—if transitory—reputation on a host of issues. Future research needs to establish the exact causal dynamics behind public opinion about the parties—whether they are tied to specific government policies and performance as well as the nature of interplay among performance, partisanship, and reputation.

Notes

1. Much of the contemporary rational choice scholarship about political parties, following the seminal work of Downs (1957), also emphasizes the importance of party reputation and the incentives that party leaders have to maintain and strengthen their “brand names” (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Pope and Woon 2008; Snyder and Ting 2002), but this work abstracts away from the importance of specific issues.

2. To assess the impact that salience and selection bias would have on our measures, we analyzed the few instances in which

the American National Election Studies (ANES) asked closed-ended questions similar to the ones in our data set. First, we found that the proportion of respondents who volunteered answers on the open-ended questions for these issues was very small (between 5 and 10 percent, even on a highly salient issue such as staying out of war) compared to a much larger proportion who answered the closed-ended questions. Second, when we computed versions of our measures (described below) and compared them for different samples (i.e., the entire sample vs. the issue public), we found substantial differences, suggesting that selection bias would indeed be a serious problem and that using ANES data would not provide an accurate depiction of the full potential that issue ownership confers.

3. Until 1992, most of these questions referred to preventing “World War III.”

4. Note that the excluded category includes respondents who thought that both or neither party would do a good job on an issue as well as respondents who were uncertain about which party was better.

5. Note that this measure is related but not equivalent to the share of the population who are aware of the parties’ reputations. It excludes respondents who may have opinions about each party’s reputation but who view both parties as equally good (or equally bad) at handling an issue, so it underestimates the awareness of party reputations.

6. Although the level of temporal aggregation can sometimes be an issue (Freeman 1989), this was the best level of aggregation given the sparse nature of our data within years and given that our objective is to examine broad trends.

7. The trend statistics are the coefficients from bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions of the measure on year. We chose 1981 as the beginning of the second period since the beginning of President Reagan's first term is a natural political breakpoint.

8. Our basic conclusions do not change much if we include a lagged dependent variable, so we present OLS results for simplicity. We obtained Stimson's (1999) measure from his Web site, <http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/time.html>. The data for macropartisanship through 1996 come from Green, Palmquist, and Schickler's (1998) replication data set, obtained from <http://research.yale.edu/vote/macrepl.html>, which we extended through 2004 using Gallup poll data. The earliest year for which both measures are available is 1953.

9. Results for two of the issues are anomalous. On the environment, the coefficient is negative and statistically significant, meaning that the Democratic advantage decreases as the public becomes more liberal. There is also a negative coefficient for partisanship and social security, meaning that the Democratic advantage is inversely related to the proportion of Democratic identifiers.

10. Graphs for the other issues are similar: for example, the correlation between partisan choices and Democratic Party unity is .71 for peace, .86 for education, .69 for health care, .71 for law and order, .64 for taxes, .59 for the environment, and .58 for foreign policy.

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