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John C. Davis

University of Arkansas at Monticello, davisjc@uamont.edu

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A New Test of Issue Ownership Theory: U.S. Senate Campaign Debates

John C. Davis – University of Arkansas at Monticello



John C. Davis, Ph.D. (University of Missouri in Columbia)

Dr. Davis is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. He completed his B.A. and M.A. in Political Science at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville and his Ph. D. in Political Science at the University of Missouri in Columbia. His research and teaching interests include political parties, legislative behavior, public policy, and state politics.



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Page | 7

This study tests issue ownership theory on U.S. Senate debates. Issue ownership theory states that each of the two major American parties possess issues which the public perceive to be best handled by one party over another. Republicans are thought to be better at handling problems concerning national defense, foreign policy, and taxes. Democrats are believed to be better at addressing issues such as education, health care, and the environment. This study hypothesizes that, due to unique characteristics regarding the office being sought, U.S. Senate candidates from both major parties do not adhere to previously recognized patterns of issue ownership and more frequently discuss Democratic issues over Republican issues. The results of content analytic programing provided supporting evidence for this hypothesis. Based on this analysis, the extent to which issue ownership applies to debates is dependent upon the position being sought.

Keywords: Issue Ownership Theory; U.S. Senate, Political Party; Campaign

This study applies issue ownership theory to U.S. Senate campaign debates. While issue ownership enjoys a rich literature in varying contexts, including campaign debates, previous scholarship has paid little attention to the application of this theory below the presidential level, in general, and U.S. Senate campaign debates, in particular. Despite the lack of research on the topic, scholarship examining public opinion polling and the effects of issue ownership on Senate campaign television spots suggests the roles of legislative office—being more domestically-focused than an executive role in government—encourage the discussion of Democratic issues over Republican issues, regardless of a candidate’s party. Campaign debates between those seeking election or re-election to the United States Senate—an office with a statewide constituency—provide unique opportunities to test the boundaries of applying issue ownership theory to political debates.

Debates are significant campaign events. In addition to the public paying a notable amount of attention to debates (Patterson, 2002), these contests pit competing candidates against one another face-to-face (Chaffee, 1979); allow for the public to listen and assess the candidates’ views on issues for an extended period, and, at times, these encounters influence voters (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003). Another notable characteristic of debates is their ability to capture the attention of the “marginally attentive” (Pfau, 2003) or those among the public who otherwise would not seek out information regarding races or candidates. These members of the electorate



are also called “peripheral voters” (Kaufmann, Petrocik, & Shaw, 2008) because they are most affected by short-term political events.

The existing political debate literature on lower-ticket races (for the purposes of this paper “lower-ticket” refers to any campaign other than presidential) is lacking. Perhaps due to the prestige of the office, the relative ease by which data are acquired, or its national constituency, the bulk of political debate scholarship in the United States focuses on presidential campaigns. It is important that scholars not neglect lower-ticket debates in the literature as these contests allow for a theory’s generalizability to be measured. Lower-ticket campaign debates have enjoyed a significant increase in frequency since the 1970s (Trent, Friedenber, & Denton Jr., 2011) offering scholars opportunities to examine existing theories—based on empirical study on presidential campaign debates—in the contexts of state and local contests. As debate scholarship continues to grow in size and scope (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), it is necessary that lower-ticket debates—such as U.S. Senate campaign debates—are more thoroughly examined. Scholarship focusing on non-presidential debates expands our knowledge of existing debate theory in varying environments. After reviewing issue ownership and its development in debate literature, issue ownership theory will applied to Senatorial campaign debates.

Issue Ownership Theory

Issue ownership theory posits that major party candidates frame issues in such a way that, over time, voters perceive one of the two parties to be better suited at handling a particular issue than the other party (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrock, 1996). The party’s superior competence over the rival party is largely determined by an individual’s party preference (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2014) and whether or not the particular issue in is perceived, by the person, as a priority of for the respective party in question (Egan, 2013).

Issue ownership has been articulated as multidimensional—consisting of a competence dimension and an associative dimension (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). The more developed component of this multidimensional concept found in the literature—competency—has received considerable scholarly attention. Specifically, issue ownership has been applied to explain, in part, voter behavior at the individual level (Green & Hobolt, 2008; Meyer & Muller, 2013; Stubager & Slothuus, 2013), the strategic interplay between campaign advertising and media coverage of political candidates (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994; Hays 2008; Van der Brug & Berkhout, 2015), through the lenses of different party systems (Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Van der Brug, 2004; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009; Greys, 2012) and presidential campaign debates (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik & Benoit, 2003; Petroick, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003/2004). More recently, research has begun investigating issue ownership in social media networks (Guo & Vargo, 2015).

In the contemporary American context, the notion of issue ownership leads to Democratic candidates’ campaigns emphasizing issues such as education, healthcare, and job



creation while Republicans address taxes, national defense, foreign relations, and cutting the deficit. This emphasis is due to the partisan candidates' interests in increasing the saliency of the issues in which their respective party "owns." Petrocik wrote that, "a candidate's campaign can be understood as a 'marketing' effort: The goal is to achieve a strategic advantage by making problems which reflect owned issues...the criteria by which voters make their choice" (p. 828). While voters' policy stances remain rather stable over time (Page & Shapiro, 1992), national events (recession, war, etc.) can shift issue priorities and advantage one party over another. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003/2004) found empirical evidence to support the presence of issue ownership in presidential campaigning.

While advertisements and other candidate-directed messaging are controlled by the campaign, debates are unscripted and present office seekers with the challenge of staying on message while also complying with debate parameters. Developing and maintaining a consistent theme throughout a debate can be challenging to debaters facing unscripted questions from moderators or members of the audience. As Trent and Friedenberg (2000) wrote, "As the debate progresses, candidates must constantly respond to specific questions on the issue of the day. While those issues vary from campaign to campaign, most successful political debaters have been able to integrate the specific issues into an overall framework" (p.268). Regarding issue ownership, specifically, Petrocik provided an example of how the theory plays a role in candidates' attempts to stay on message with their debate responses:

A Republican asked about his plans to deal with urban unemployment might stress the importance of stimulating business opportunities through investment credits and less regulations; a Democrat asked about how to reduce crime might talk about investments in education and training programs that provide employable skills. Candidates respond thus both because they are likely to be consistent with their personal beliefs and because to do otherwise would advantage their opponent (Petrocik, 1996, p. 829).

In other words, candidates focus their attention on those issues that their respective party is perceived to be strongest.

While this theory has not been applied to U.S. Senate debates, issue ownership has been applied to presidential debates. Increasing the sample size from a previous study on issue selection and campaign advertising (Benoit & Hansen, 2002), Benoit and Hansen (2004) found evidence to support the existence of issue ownership in that candidates more frequently discuss their own party's issues over their opponent's. In addition, these authors found that presidential candidates (of both parties) discussed Republican issues during debates more than Democratic issues. The study concluded that this may be because "Republican-owned" issues are closer aligned to the unique powers and duties of the President.

Petrocik (1996) recognized that a party's ownership, while quite stable, can change over time. However, the relative stability with regard to public perception of issue ownership results in a party being unable to "steal" another party's issues, according to Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave (2013). Nonetheless, Benoit and Hansen's (2004) study of issue ownership and



presidential debates suggests the context of the position being sought may also play a role in the strength of issue ownership.

While presidential candidates aspire to have a national constituency, senators are only held accountable by a state-wide electorate. Does this variation change the way issue ownership plays out in Senate campaign debates? Until this paper, no known study of this nature has been done. However, Benoit and Airne (2005) did lend credence to the idea that issue ownership's level of existence may vary with the political office being sought. Their study examined the extent of issue ownership in non-presidential television spots. The authors concluded:

Local ads and US Senate spots from 2002 did not follow issue ownership predictions (candidates did not discuss their own party's issues significantly more than the other party's issues.) Unlike presidential spots, non-presidential advertising discusses Democratic issues more than Republican ones; the Republican Party owns more national or federal issues such as national and foreign policy (p. 493).

Following up on Benoit and Airne's (2005) work, Brazeal and Benoit (2008) expanded their sample size of Senate television spots to find that, while Democrats favored Democratic issues and Republicans favored Republican issues, the results were statistically insignificant. Thus, the study finds that issue ownership in Senate campaign television spots is much weaker than that found in previous studies at the presidential campaign level. Much like the earlier study by Benoit and Airne (2005), the Brazeal and Benoit (2008) study suggested the domestic focuses of day to day legislative activities and constituency concerns of a senator lead to more Democratic discussion. This contrasts the findings of Benoit and Hansen (2004) that stated that the presidential office seems to favor Republican issues.

While issue ownership is well-established in both political party and presidential debate literatures, U.S. Senate campaign debates provide an untested arena for issue ownership. Benoit and Airne (2005) and Brazeal and Benoit (2008) provided evidence that senate campaigns operate differently from presidential campaigns in terms of issue ownership. It has been suggested that this difference is due, in part, to the different constituencies and duties of the offices. Kauffman (2004) extended this line of thought by examining public opinion data for 1988 U.S. Senate races and proposing that some candidates may be equipped to capitalize on issues typically "owned" by their opponent's party.

This study will offer a test of issue ownership in U.S. Senate debates to determine if the distinctions in controlled messaging (advertisements and television spots) for presidential and Senate candidates exist in U.S. Senate campaign debates or if the differences in constituency and responsibility provide context for violation of the theory.

Methodology



This study examines the extent to which issue ownership theory applies to U.S. Senate debates. Existing debate literature focuses on presidential debates and provides strong evidence to suggest candidates promote the issues their respective parties “own” in order to increase salience of those issues and therefore gain an electoral advantage. While no known study has examined this relationship at the Senate campaign debate level, previous scholarship on U.S. Senate television advertisements have provided mixed or weak evidence to support issue ownership. To provide a possible explanation for these mixed findings, I subscribe to the conclusions of Benoit and Airne (2005), and Brazeal and Benoit (2008). The constituencies, powers and responsibilities of the Presidency and Senate each favor one of the two major parties more than the other (President-Republican and Senate-Democratic) and suggest that Senate campaign debates may deviate from issue ownership theory.

The first of two hypotheses suggests confirmation of Benoit and Airne’s (2005) and Brazeal and Benoit’s (2008) earlier results concerning U.S. Senate campaign advertisements, and extends their findings to Senate campaign debates.

H₁. In U.S. Senate debates, Democratic candidates and Republican candidates discuss a larger proportion of Democratic issues.

The second hypothesis predicts a non-significant relationship and runs counter to existing debate literature on issue ownership suggesting candidates discuss issues their respective parties “own.” A predicted null finding would show that issue ownership (as it has been explained at the presidential campaign debate level) does not apply. This hypothesis, instead, argues that issue ownership is subject to the position being sought.

H₂. In U.S. Senate debates, Democratic candidates and Republican candidates will not discuss their respective party’s “owned” issues significantly more than that of the other party’s “owned” issues.

In order to test these two hypotheses, I use Concordance content analytic computer software to count the frequencies in which candidates discuss issues of their own party or of their opponents’. Benoit and Hansen (2004) stated that there are two reasons for using computer content analysis to test for issue ownership in debates: “it allows analysis of a large body of texts and it assures reliability” (p. 147). This investigation required that I obtain debate transcripts from senatorial debates. Another advantage to using Concordance is that the software not only provides the frequency in which an issue is discussed but also provides the context. The ability to ensure each issue is being introduced in a manner consistent with issue ownership theory is a valuable capability of the software program. By considering the context in which a word or phrase is introduced, the researcher can evaluate whether the candidates are exploiting their respective parties’ “owned” issues or if they are responding to an opponent or the moderator.



Petrocik (1996) provided 35 issues that can be identified as being “owned” by one of the two major parties. Benoit and Hansen (2004) analyzed 5 Democratic issues (education, healthcare, environment, jobs, and poverty) and 5 Republican issues (national defense, foreign policy, federal spending/deficit, taxation, and abortion). For the sake of consistency, I adopt these same ten issues for coding purposes.

Table 1 provides information regarding the four debates analyzed. Of the debates in the sample, one debate (Akin-McCaskill) took place before the 2012 general election while the remaining three occurred before the 2010 mid-terms. While three of the four debates featured the two candidates together, one (Boxer-Fiorina) took place with one candidate in the state of the contested race

(Fiorina) and the other in Washington D.C. (Boxer). Of the four debates, one aired on a Public Broadcasting System affiliate (Angle-Reid), one on CNN (Coons-O’Donnell), one on a National Public Radio affiliate (Boxer-Fiorina). The 2012 Akin-McCaskill debate was the second of two. None of the debates in the sample feature third party candidate participation. In all four cases, transcripts were “cleaned” by removing moderator statements and questions.

These debates were chosen for the study for three reasons. First, variation was sought in the sample with regard to incumbency. Senators McCaskill, Reid, and Boxer were seeking re-election to the U.S. Senate while the contest between Coons and O’Donnell was an open seat competition. Additionally, despite the fact that the three incumbents are all Democrats, these incumbents are relatively diverse in their ideological placement—relative to their Democratic colleagues in the Senate. Ideological placement is determined by employing dynamic, weighted, nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) scores that place congressional members in an ideological spectrum (Poole & Rosenthal, 1997; Poole & Rosenthal, 2007). DW-NOMINATE scores reflect legislators’ voting behavior on contemporary “liberal” and “conservative” issues (voteview.com). Of the three Democratic incumbent U.S. Senators in the sample, Boxer was the most liberal (10th most liberal in the 111th Congress), Reid was second (28th most liberal in the 111th Congress), and McCaskill was the third (49th most liberal in the 111th Congress; 42nd in the 112th Congress). In 2012, McCaskill was considered by many to be a centrist candidate in her re-election bid. Spialek and Munz (2014) observed that in her debates against U.S. Representative Todd Akin, she “...constructed a centrist issue agenda consisting of Republican, Democratic, and uniquely centrist issues” (p. 29).

Table 1: Debates in Sample

Candidates	Party	Year	Location
Rep. Akin Sen. McCaskill	R D	2012	St. Louis, MO
Ms. Angle Sen. Reid	R D	2010	Las Vegas, NV
Mr. Coons Ms. O’Donnell	D R	2010	Newark, DE
Sen. Boxer Ms. Fiorina	D R	2010	Washington, D.C. Pasadena, CA



In addition to these cases providing variation with regard to incumbency status and ideological placement, these four races were highly publicized by regional and national media outlets. It stands to reason that, if anything, the media attention these four races—and the debates as consequence—garnered would produce environments more conducive to supporting issue ownership theory as it has been portrayed in presidential races. The national coverage of these races probably enhanced the likelihood that Democratic and Republican candidates alike would seek to emphasize the issues that voters identify as their respective parties' stronger issues at the national level. The political environments surrounding these debates provide more rigorous tests of my hypotheses.

The debate transcripts were broken down by the party member response (all Republicans were separated from their Democratic opponents) and moderator statements and questions are removed in order to isolate the responses of the candidates. The content analysis program produces a count for each word stated in the debates. Context is also important when coding issues. In their study, Benoit and Hansen (2004) noted that Concordance allowed them to, “check the context of the terms “drug” and “drugs” so we count uses of “prescription drugs” in health care but not instances of “drug abuse” (p. 147). Similarly, this investigation considered the context of the words spoken. The 2010 and 2012 election cycles followed the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—a controversial policy supported by President Obama and large majorities of Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate. There can be no doubt the ACA was a recurring theme—and potential complicating factor—in all congressional campaign debates since 2010 to today. Fortunately, the content analytic software allows the user to read the line of text in which each word appears to ensure proper coding. For instance, the word “worker” appears four times among Democratic candidate responses. The context of the word each time dealt with immigration policy, but without investigating the matter further, I might have concluded that the word was a Democratic coded issue-“jobs.”

Following computer content analysis, the data were recoded into two dichotomous variables. The dependent variable, the issues discussed, was coded as either Democratic or Republican. The independent variable, party of the candidate, was coded the same way. The Democratic issues were summed together as were the Republican issues. Due to the nominal nature of the data collected and coded, a chi-square test was utilized to test the hypotheses.

Results

Table 2 presents the results of this study on issue ownership in U.S. Senate campaign debates. The findings derived from four highly-publicized U.S. Senate campaign debates from the 2010 and 2012 election cycles support both of the proposed hypotheses.

Table 2: Issue Ownership in U.S. Senate Campaign Debates

Candidates	Issues Discussed		χ^2 ($df = 1$)
	Democratic	Republican	
Democratic	417 (55%)	340 (45%)	2.261
Republican	305 (51%)	294 (49%)	N = 1359

Note: p-value indicates high level of doubt in rejecting null hypothesis at $\alpha = .05$

Overall, a majority of the issues raised by the U.S. Senate candidates have been previously evaluated to be “owned” by Democrats (education, health care, environment, jobs, and poverty). Among Democratic candidates, 55% of the issues discussed were Democratic “owned” ones. Among Republican candidates, 51% of issues discussed were Democratic “owned” issues. Consequently, Republican issues were discussed 45% of the time by Democrats and 49% of the time by Republicans.

In addition, the model’s chi-squared coefficient is below the critical level for significance resulting in a p-value of .133 (above the conventional $\alpha .05$). This provides further support for what the proportions suggest: issue ownership (office-seekers disproportionately discussing the issues their party is perceived to be more competent in handling in order to raise saliency and gain electoral advantages) does not apply to U.S. Senate debates. More specifically, these results suggest candidates for the U.S. Senate may debate issues more closely associated with the Democratic Party.

Discussion

This study tests the extent to which issue ownership theory applies to U.S. Senate debates. Previous investigations into the role of issue ownership—albeit, in presidential debates—have found evidence to support the theory in a variety of contexts (Benoit & Hansen, 2002; Benoit & Hansen, 2004). However, the results of this study—U.S. Senate candidates emphasize issues in campaign debates previously thought to be “owned” by the Democratic



Party—lend support for scholarship on the role of issue ownership in non-presidential television spots. Until this study, no investigation has been done to test the theory on U.S. Senate campaign debates, specifically.

Previous scholarship reported that presidential candidates, while discussing most frequently their own party's issues, tended to favor Republican issues (Benoit & Hansen, 2004). This is said to be due to the role of the office being sought—as the position inherently favors Republican “owned” issues. Likewise, given the powers, duties, and—perhaps most importantly—statewide constituencies of senators, it makes sense that Democratic and Republican candidates for the U.S. Senate favor issues perceived by the public to be best handled by Democrats (education, health care, environment, jobs, and poverty). Mayhew (1974) emphasized the desires of elected officers to maintain their offices by gaining re-election. Given this, it is rational for U.S. Senatorial candidates' debates to emphasize domestic issues—as they are commonly the immediate concerns of citizens—often directly affecting members of the voting public.

It could be argued that what is captured by this study are short-term effects and that the addition of more debates from different election cycles might reveal contradictory findings—as election cycles seem to have their own unique issues and concerns. While a higher number of cases—spread out over a greater number of election cycles—might satisfy a methodological critique of this nature, the concern regarding short-term effects is mitigated by the pre-existing issue-ownership literature that acknowledged short-term effects and noted of their limited ability to significantly alter results (Petrocik, 1996).

The findings in this paper are intended to enrich issue ownership theory and stimulate scholarly discussion of the theory's application in varying contexts. Based on the findings of this investigation, it is reasonable to assume that the degree to which candidates engage in issue ownership in political debates is subject to the position being sought. Candidates competing for a seat in the U.S. Senate seek positions with different powers, responsibilities, and constituencies than those who seek the Presidency. Thus, candidates for the United States Senate—regardless of their party identification—emphasize their knowledge of and experience with domestic concerns, which previous scholarship suggests are “owned” by the Democratic Party, by and large. The conclusion of this study is not that a party seeks to claim ownership of an issue previously thought to be owned by another. Given the relative stability of voter perceptions of issue ownership, candidates who attempt such a maneuver are likely to fail—as Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrove (2013) suggested. Rather, this study suggests that exceptions exist with regard to the office being sought. In addition to providing a unique test of issue ownership, the findings from this study emphasize the role of context and nuance when considering the application of such a theory.

As another general election cycle approaches, this study aims to shed light on the importance of context when studying political debates through the lens of issue ownership. As stated earlier, issue ownership is quite stable over time. However, those seeking office are fully

aware of the constituency in which each aspires to serve—altering the ways in which issue ownership is implemented by candidates. The literature suggests we can be fairly confident that the 2016 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates will each seek to emphasize the issues which their respective party is perceived to be most competent in handling. Based on the findings in this paper, observers can also expect upcoming campaign debates for seats in the U.S. Senate to, on average, discuss issues thought more often to be “owned” by Democrats. However, in addition to the type of office being sought, there are likely other factors involved in determining the extent to which issue ownership is exercised in a campaign debate. For example, existing research does not yet shed light on whether or not the sex of the debate competitors impacts the way that issue ownership is exercised—a potentially important topic in 2016 as the current favorite for the Democratic presidential nominee is female—Hillary Clinton. Petrocik (1996) wrote, “...personal characteristics can convey ownership of an issue: gender can determine who is the more reliable candidate on matters of sex discrimination, a retired war hero is a particularly credible commentator on military security” (p.847). The findings reported in this paper might encourage future scholarship on the role of candidates’ genders and backgrounds, as this avenue holds promise as a fruitful path for future scholarship. Additionally, future research could expand and improve upon the collective understanding of issue ownership theory—as it relates to campaign debates. The relatively little attention paid to issue ownership and U.S. Senate campaign debates is still greater than that which is spent considering the theories’ application to state and local campaign debates. Finally, campaign debates for non-partisan elected positions provide avenues for research with regard to the use of Democratic and Republican “owned” issues.

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