Issue Ownership, Issue Positions, and Candidate Assessment

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Abstract

I argue that citizens alter their views of candidates’ ideological and issue positions in response to two kinds of informational cues: issue ownership and issue position cues. Candidates communicate issue ownership cues suggesting that they are similar to the party that owns an issue when they discuss a party-owned issue and do not take a position. When candidates take a position on an issue, their message contains an issue position cue which suggests that they are more congruent with the party associated with the position. I use data drawn from a survey experiment embedded in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to show that participants’ assessments of a fictional Senator’s ideology, positions on issues the Senator discussed, and positions on issues the Senator did not discuss shift in the directions implied by the cues to which they were exposed.
One of the most important topics that public opinion and campaigns scholars grapple with is the degree to which citizens are responsive to politics. The classic findings suggest that citizens tend to be politically inattentive, which may not be surprising given that most individuals report that they are not interested in politics and that they care little about electoral outcomes (Campbell et al. 1960). More recent work confirms these findings and further suggests that citizens may not even understand contemporary policy debates (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). These findings suggest the existence of two potential problems, the first of which is for democratic accountability: how can an inattentive public respond in reasonable ways to political conditions and events? The second problem is faced by candidates: how can candidates communicate with citizens who do not pay attention to, and know very little about, politics?

The conventional wisdom among scholars of public opinion is that party cues and party labels are sufficient for citizens to make reasonably informed political decisions (Downs 1957; Conover and Feldman 1982; Feldman and Conover 1983; Rahn 1993) and that issues do not play an important role in the formation of citizens’ attitudes. These findings suggest the existence of an important puzzle: if issues do not matter because citizens do not pay attention, then why do citizens claim that they want to know more about candidates’ policy solutions and why do citizens appear to dislike feeling uncertain about candidates’ positions (Bartels 1986; Alvarez 1997; but see Tomz and Van Houweling 2009)? Furthermore, why do campaigns involve so much discussion of political issues and why do candidates care so much about “staying on message?” This research focuses on the following question: how does discussion of issues and issue positions by a candidate affect citizens’ views of the candidate’s ideological dispositions and the candidate’s positions on the issues he does and does not discuss?

Citizens tend to form attitudes about candidates based on key heuristics like party identification. While party is a powerful heuristic, citizens recognize that not all Democrats
and Republicans are identical. I argue that citizens update their views of candidates in response to small bits of policy information in the form of two types of informational cues contained within candidates’ messages. The first, *issue ownership cues*, are present in messages in which candidates discuss an issue that is “owned” — or strongly associated with — a party [Petrocik 1996]. Citizens should view the candidates as being more similar to the party that owns the issues the candidates discuss both ideologically and on the specific issue that was mentioned. I further argue that citizens should make similar inferences about candidates’ positions on issues that they do not discuss.

The second kind of cue — *“issue position cues”* — are present when candidates identify their positions on issues. Citizens should again think about candidates in terms of the party associated with the positions candidates outline, which should similarly affect citizens’ views of candidates’ positions on the issues candidates talks about, those that are not discussed, and the candidates’ general ideological dispositions.

I test my theory using a survey experiment embedded in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) in which I exposed participants to statements made by a fictional Senator. These messages contained several different types of informational cues. The control treatment contained party labels but no issue or positional information while the experimental treatments contained party labels and some combination of issue and positional information in the form of four different kinds of informational cues: consistent ownership cues, consistent positional cues, competing ownership cues, and competing positional cues. Consistent cues either matched or were counter to the party label of the Senator while competing cues contained both matching and non-matching information. I test my theory in three contexts: participants’ placements of the Senator’s ideology, his position on the issues he mentioned in the treatments, and his position on issues he does not mention. My results show that citizens alter their views of the Senator in response to these cues and imply that citizens may be more sophisticated that previous research suggests because the meaning of
issue ownership appears to extend beyond perceptions of issue advantage. The discussion of party-owned issues appears to communicate positional information about candidates, which further suggests that issues matter and have potentially powerful effects on citizens’ views of political figures above and beyond the effects produced by party labels.

1 Attitude Formation and Issues

There are several potentially important sources of information from which citizens may draw upon when forming attitudes about candidates during campaigns. Social cognition research suggests that citizens evaluate candidates by categorizing them based on a social taxonomy in a subconscious attempt to reduce the complexity of the social world because doing so is the most straightforward way of reducing political complexity (Conover and Feldman 1989; Kinder 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Rahn et al. 1990). Citizens hold expectations about which issues are associated with members of the parties based on stereotypes associated with them (Rahn 1993). Democratic and Republican elected officials have long exhibited consistently different policy preferences (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page 1978) and reputations (Snyder and Ting 2002), a fact that likely reinforces Americans’ tendency to think about politics in terms of groups (Converse 1964). Party labels and other partisan cues provide voters with informational shortcuts (Downs 1957) and knowledge about the partisanship of a candidate allows people to make useful inferences (Conover 1981; Granberg, Kasmer, and Nanneman 1988; Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985; Hurwitz 1985; Jacoby 1988; Page 1978; Riggle et al. 1992; Wright and Niemi 1983). In short, cognitive heuristics may make political attitude formation and decision-making easier for citizens (but see Lau and Redlawsk 2001).

There is some evidence that citizens are unable to recall the issues that candidates talk about during campaigns (e.g. Dalager 1996). If this is true, it would suggest that the issues
candidates choose to discuss in campaigns are irrelevant. However, there is evidence that repetition in campaign advertising reinforces associations between issues and candidates (Claibourn 2008) and that citizens evaluate candidates and people more generally using an on-line process (Hamilton and Sherman 1996; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; McGraw and Stroh 1990; McGraw and Dolan 2007). This suggests that even if citizens forget specifics, they will still update their attitudes about candidates to reflect the information to which they have been exposed.

1.1 Party Ownership of Issues and Candidate Assessment

Findings reported in the issue ownership literature suggest that certain issues have become associated with the parties to the extent that they are perceived by the electorate to be “owned” by one of the parties (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Egan Forthcoming). Parties take ownership of issues by repeatedly and consistently addressing problems stemming from the issues over time. When parties are successful, citizens on average believe the party that owns an issue is better able to handle problems related to that issue than parties that do not own the issue. Issue ownership, then, can be thought of as a form of issue advantage that originates from the perceived strengths and weaknesses of political parties rather than of individual candidates.

While some proponents of issue ownership argue that candidates should rarely if ever discuss the issues owned by their opponents and should avoid discussing the same issues as their opponents (e.g. Simon 2002), more recent work suggests that “issue trespassing” — the discussion of issues owned by a different party — occurs frequently in U.S. campaigns and that candidates competing against each other often discuss the same issues. (Sigelman

\[1\]In the U.S., the Democratic Party tends to own issues related to social welfare, social class and group relations, gender equality, civil rights, and civil liberties. Republicans tend to own issues like crime, national security, lifestyles, and taxation. See Petrocik (1996) for more examples and Egan (Forthcoming) for updated survey data that largely confirms Petrocik’s initial coding scheme.
and Buell 2004; Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006; Banda 2011; Banda and Carsey 2012). Sides (2006) finds that candidates who discuss their opponents’ issues do so by reframing the issue in a way to emphasize the strengths of the candidate or her party (see also Holian 2004). While there is evidence that candidates are covered in a more positive way when the news media focuses more attention on the issues those candidates own (Hayes 2008), it does not appear that the issue agendas of candidates as they relate to issue ownership have strong effects on electoral outcomes (Sides 2007).

Scholars of issue ownership have mostly focused on the issue advantage dimension of issue ownership and have not yet considered how issue ownership affects the ways citizens view candidates’ ideological and issue positions. If citizens associate some issues with specific parties, then they should — in the absence of positional information — view candidates who discuss a party-owned issue as being more ideologically congruent with the party that owns the issue than they otherwise would have. In this sense, citizens should be able to learn about the ideological dispositions of candidates even in the face of otherwise ambiguous information. Similarly, when a candidate takes a position commonly associated with a party, the candidate should also be viewed as being more ideologically congruent with the party associated with that position. Citizens should also assess candidates’ positions on issues they discuss in a similar fashion - by responding to informational cues embedded within candidates’ messages.

Citizens should also use the information that they have at their disposal to infer candidates’ positions on issues that are not discussed. For example, a candidate who has taken consistently conservative (liberal) positions on a number of issues may be viewed as holding conservative (liberal) positions on other issues. This sort of inference is reasonable because political elites are ideologically constrained to a greater extent than are citizens (Converse 1964). Politicians generally hold positions that are at the very least moderately cohesive with their parties and clear messages are likely to be strong in the contemporary period
given the high levels of party polarization exhibited in the U.S. Congress (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 2007). In addition, the messages explicated by the parties during and between campaigns suggest that members tend to hold fairly cohesive sets of preferences.

1.2 Information Cues and Candidate Assessment

I argue that the messages communicated by candidates to citizens during campaigns can contain information cues that affect citizens’ views of the candidate by associating that candidate with one of the two major U.S. political parties. These cues vary on two dimensions. The first dimension is the issue dimension — do the messages contain cues relating to issue ownership or issue positions? The second dimension is centered on the consistency of the cues — are they consistent with one another or do some of the cues present competing information? Table 1 contains a two by two matrix summarizing this typology, which I further describe below.

[Table 1 about here.]

1.2.1 Consistent Cues: Issue Position and Issue Ownership Cues

The messages communicated by candidates to citizens during campaigns can contain two kinds of information cues: issue position cues and issue ownership cues. When candidates identify their position on an issue, they are sending a clear signal via an issue position cue about their ideological disposition that citizens should be able to translate into attitudes about the candidates’ ideologies and positions on issues. These cues should be difficult for citizens to misinterpret because they are contained within messages containing explicit information about candidates.

Candidates do not always want to identify their positions, but they can still send positional signals to citizens by choosing to discuss certain kinds of issues. As detailed in the
previous section, some issues are so closely related to a party that they are “owned” by that party. I argue that candidates can transmit positional signals to citizens by discussing a party owned issue without taking a position on that issue. These kinds of messages contain an *issue ownership cue*. The information communicated by an issue ownership cue is implicit because the candidate does not directly communicate her position on an issue. Instead, she allows citizens to infer her ideological and issue positions using the information implied by the issue ownership cue, which associates the candidate with the party that owns the issue the candidate discussed. Given the close relationship between issues and the party that owns them, it is reasonable for citizens to use issue ownership cues to inform their attitudes about a candidate.

When citizens hear candidates talk about issues without taking positions on those issues, issue ownership cues should lead citizens to think about the candidates in terms of the party that owns the issue. For example, a Democratic candidate who talks about taxes, a Republican owned issue, but does not take a position should be viewed as being more conservative and as holding positions on issues that are more congruent with the Republican Party than she would have had the candidate avoided discussing issues. In other words, citizens should assess the candidate as being more similar to the Republican Party.

Citizens should react similarly when they hear candidates take positions on issues. People associate positions on many issues with parties, so when a candidate takes Democratic positions on one or more issues, people should infer that the candidate is more liberal than they might have thought had the candidate not identified a position. Citizens who know that this candidate holds Democratic positions on issues should also assess them as holding positions that are more congruent with the Democratic Party on these issues than they would have had they not been exposed to messages containing issue position cues.

Note that this does not imply that the Democratic candidate in this example should be viewed as being as conservative as a generic Republican candidate, merely that they should be viewed as more conservative than they would have been had they avoided discussing issues entirely.
I further argue that issue position cues should dominate issue ownership cues. In other words, citizens who are exposed to a message that contains both should only respond to issue position cues. This is because issue position cues contain more explicit information that should overwhelm the effect of the implicit information contained in the ownership cue. For example, if a citizen heard a Democratic candidate take a Republican position on a Democratic issue, she should respond to the position cue when forming an assessment of the candidate rather than the ownership cue because the former explicitly informs her that the candidate shares some commonalities with the Republican Party.

Because candidates do not discuss all political issues, citizens must infer the positions they hold on these issues based on the information to which they have access — the issues candidates choose to talk about and the positions they explicate. Citizens should infer that a candidate who exhibits conservative (liberal) policy preferences also holds conservative (liberal) preferences on issues that she does not address because partisan elites tend to exhibit higher levels of attitude constraint than do non-elites (Converse 1964) and parties and the media reenforce the notion that party elites exhibit ideological consistency.

Figure [I] contains a graphical representation of the process I outlined above for the example of citizens’ views of candidates’ ideological positions. Panel (a) shows the kind of perceptions citizens might have of a generic Democrat — $D$ — and Republican — $R$ — in which the Democrat is viewed as being more liberal than the Republican. Panel (b) shows the change in perceptions my theoretical argument would lead me to expect given the presence of a “congruent cue,” one which suggests the candidates are more like their own parties. This could be either a consistent position cue or a consistent ownership cue. For example, a Democrat might talk about Democratic owned issues without outlining their position or may explicate a position associated with the Democratic Party. In this case, perceptions of the candidates’ ideological positions should shift towards the poles as the candidates become more tightly associated with their own parties. Finally, Panel (c) shows the expected effect
of an “incongruent cue,” one that associates a candidate with the opposing party. In this case, citizens’ views of the candidates should shift towards the opposing poles. As shown in the figure, these kinds of cues should lead to the candidates being viewed as holding more moderate ideological positions than candidates who communicate no information at all beyond their partisanship.

[Figure 1 about here.]

1.2.2 Competing Cues

So far I have only discussed consistent information cues, i.e. those that contain the information that is noncontradictory. For example, a candidate might talk about two issues but take positions on both that are associated with the same party. However, candidates are not forced to take this strategy and may find it advantageous to associate themselves with both parties by crafting messages in which they communicate contradictory positional information. In other words, candidates’ messages may contain competing information cues.

I argue that there are two additional types of cues that can be contained within candidates’ messages. First, candidates can communicate competing ownership cues by discussing issues owned by both parties while not taking positions on either. Second, candidates can communicate competing position cues by taking some Democratic positions and some Republican positions on issues. Because the two kinds of competing cues present citizens with contradictory information, the high degree of ambiguity inherent in them may generate greater levels of uncertainty among citizens which may in turn lead citizens to use different information processing strategies than what I discussed in the previous section.

I argue that citizens engage in dual-processing (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Arce- 8neaux 2008) and thus respond in different ways to competing ownership and position cues.

8Readers should note that these cues are again consistent in terms of the language used in Table 1. Consistency merely implies that the cues do not contain contradictory information.
When citizens have access to a simple heuristic such as a party label, they may be inclined to use the heuristic rather than thinking more systematically about the information to which they have been exposed (Rahn 1993; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). Citizens should be more likely to rely on party heuristics when the information they are exposed to is more ambiguous. In other words, citizens should rely more heavily on information processing strategies that are informed by heuristics when they are exposed to confusing and less direct information.

As a result, I argue that citizens should rely on party labels to a greater extent when updating their attitudes about a candidate when they have been exposed to competing ownership cues. These kinds of cues are subtle like issue ownership cues, but unlike those outlined in the previous section, competing ownership cues do not encourage citizens to associate candidates with a single party; instead, they associate the candidate with both parties and they do so implicitly. These kinds of informational cues are therefore quite subtle and may be too ambiguous for citizens to use when updating their views of candidates. Instead, they may respond only to the information implied by the candidates’ party labels.

I also argue that citizens who are exposed to competing position cues should engage in more systematic information processing. While these kinds of cues are also ambiguous in the sense that they communicate competing signals about the ideologies and positions of the candidates, the cues themselves are also more explicit in nature. Because competing position cues should encourage systematic information processing, I argue that citizens who are exposed to these kinds of messages will devote more cognitive resources to considering these cues. The surprising information — i.e. the incongruent position cue — should stand out to citizens and, thus, should be more likely to be used when citizens update their perceptions of the candidate and should be more accessible (Zaller 1992) when citizens think about candidates in the future.
2 Data and Methods

I test my theory of candidate assessment by using a survey experiment contained in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Approximately 2,000 people participated across two separate “team content” modules of equal size. Respondents are generally representative of the population of adult U.S. citizens as a whole, though people with higher levels of education and greater interest in politics tend to be overrepresented. These data are, however, better than those used in many experimental designs because the CCES allows me to experiment on a much larger and more representative sample of the electorate that is more diverse than the typical convenience samples made up primarily of undergraduate students or members of a single community.

Survey experiments are useful because they provide researchers with the ability to determine which factors cause the behaviors of interest. Furthermore, when the sample utilized for a survey experiment is representative of the population of interest, the generalizability of a researcher’s findings expands. Even so, as has been recently noted by some scholars, survey experiments may still face problems relating to external validity (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007; Kinder 2007). Barabas and Jerit (2010), for example, find that the effects observed in a survey experiment may not translate to the population as a whole because they are driven primarily by responses among members of certain subgroups. The results I outline in this research should be interpreted as the effects of issue ownership and issue position cues on the views held by those citizens who might be exposed to similar political messages in the real world, not necessarily on all citizens regardless of their proclivity to become exposed to political information.
2.1 Experimental Design

The CCES is completed by participants online\textsuperscript{4} Participants were first asked to answer a number of demographic and political questions. They were then asked to read a short statement made by a fictional Senator from “another state.”\textsuperscript{5} Finally, they were asked to assess the Senator’s ideology and positions on several issues. The initial prompt read as follows:

\textit{We would like your reaction to some comments made at a recent re-election campaign appearance by a Senator from a different state, [Democratic/Republican] Senator Franklin, who said:}

The Senator’s partisanship was randomly assigned with equal probability as either a Democrat or a Republican. Next, participants were randomly assigned to a treatment, each of which contained a short set of statements attributed to the Senator. These statements along with the Senator’s randomly assigned partisanship combined to form the treatments received by participants. I varied whether or not the Senator talked about issues, the party ownership of the issues he talked about, whether or not he expressed his positions on the issues, and whether or not the positions he took were congruent with his party. Table 2 summarizes the random assignment of participants into each treatment group\textsuperscript{6} The “no issues” treatment serves as the control group in my analyses.

\textsuperscript{4}Internet survey research is significantly cheaper than many other survey collection methods, but because the distribution of internet access is not uniform, internet samples could be biased towards younger, better educated, and wealthier people. YouGov provided internet access to people who lacked it, which helps to alleviate this problem.

\textsuperscript{5}Participants were not told that this Senator was fictional.

\textsuperscript{6}Approximately equal numbers of participants received each treatment. The rates of exposure per treatment are nearly identical for participants across CCES modules.
When the fictional Senator talked about issues, he discussed issues that were owned by either the Democratic or Republican Party. The Democratic-owned issues were affirmative action and health care while the Republican-owned issues were taxes and national defense. In nearly all cases, when the Senator’s statements contained any issue content, that content was about only Democratic or Republican owned issues. In other words, when candidates talked about issues they mostly communicated consistent position or ownership cues.

There were two treatments containing competing cues. First, the competing ownership cues treatments contained mentions of one Democratic and one Republican owned issue: affirmative action and taxes. Second, the competing position cues treatment contained a Democratic position on affirmative action and a Republican position on taxes. The full text of each treatment can be found in the appendix.

2.2 Treatments

Participants who received the control treatment read a statement in which the Senator avoided issues entirely. Nothing in the Senator’s statement should have led participants to assess him differently than they would otherwise have done. The only cue embedded in this treatment was the Senator’s partisanship. Participants’ views of the Senator in response to this treatment serve as the baseline for comparison throughout my analyses.

Next I will describe the eight experimental treatments that are summarized in Table 2. The first pair represent the consistent ownership cues treatments. Participants in the “in-party ownership cues” treatment were exposed to statements in which the Senator talked about issues that were owned by his party and did not identify his positions on the issues. In the “out-party ownership cues” treatment, participants read statements in which the Senator talked about issues that were owned by his opponent’s party. The statements in this treatment were also devoid of positional information.
The third through sixth experimental treatments represent the consistent position cues treatments, each of which exposed participants to statements involving both issues and the candidate’s positions. The statements made in the “in-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment contained mentions of issues that were owned by the Senator’s party and positions on those issues that would be expected given his partisanship. Participants who received the “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment were exposed to a statement in which the Senator discussed issues owned by his opponent’s party. He once again took positions congruent with his party on these issues. In the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” treatment, participants were exposed to a statement in which the Senator discussed issues owned by his party and, rather than taking positions on those issues that might be expected given his party, took positions in line with his opponent’s party. Subjects who received the “out-party ownership, incongruent positions” treatment read statements in which the Senator talked about issues owned by his opponent’s party and took positions on those issues that were associated with his opponent’s party.

The last two experimental treatments contained statements in which the Senator talked about one Democratic and one Republican issue. In the “competing ownership cues” treatment, subjects were exposed to a statement in which the Senator talked about a Democratic issue — affirmative action — and a Republican issue — taxation policy. No positions were identified in this treatment. In the final experimental treatment, “competing position cues,” the Senator talked about the same issues and took a position on the Democratic issue that was congruent with the Democrats and took a position on the Republican issue in line with the Republicans.

7 In other words, the text of this statement for a Democratic Senator is identical to that of a Republican Senator in the “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment. The only difference between the two is the Senator’s partisanship.
2.3 Measurement and Modeling

After being exposed to a statement attributed to the Senator, participants were asked a series of questions about their views of him. They were first asked to place him on an ideological scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. Participants were then asked to place the candidate on issues scales for the four issues the Senator could have talked about — affirmative action, health care, taxation, and national defense — and two issues that he never mentioned in any treatment — abortion and government provision of services. The endpoints of each issue scale represented absolute congruence with the Democratic or Republican parties.

Participants in both CCES modules received the same treatments and were asked to answer the questions about the same issues, but their assessments of the Senator were measured in different ways. In one module, respondents placed the Senator on the standard seven point ideological scale and placed him on eleven point scales for each of the six issues. In the second module, participants placed the candidates ideologically and on issues using a scale that ranged from 0 to 100. Because my findings are robust to either measurement strategy, I combine the responses from both modules by transforming the 0 to 100 point measures to seven point ideological and eleven point issue position measures for ease of presentation.

In order to better test the expectations generated by my theory in a single model, I rescaled participants’ assessments of the Senator so that low values indicated that he was assessed as being less congruent with his party while high values indicated that he was perceived of as being more congruent with his party both ideologically and on issues. For example, a Democratic Senator who was assessed as being ideologically conservative would

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8 The text of each question may be found in the appendix.
9 My substantive findings are not affected by this decision because the treatment effects operate in similar ways for both the Democratic and the Republican versions of the Senator. I performed a separate set of analyses on the Democratic and Republican versions of the Senator, the results of which were substantively identical to those I present in this research.
have a low score while a Republican who was also viewed as being conservative would have a high score. In other words, this rescaling leads to a measure for which low values indicate assessments that are incongruent with the Senator’s party while higher values represent greater perceived congruence ideologically and on issues with the candidate’s party.

Figure 2 contains a concrete example of this rescaling. I plot the average ideological assessments of the Senator made by participants who received the control treatment (C_D and C_R) and the “in-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment (E_D and E_R) on the top line. The D subscript refers to a Senator that was identified as a Democrat while the R subscript is for participants who observed a Republican Senator. Note that this treatment appears to shift assessments on average towards the ideological pole that is associated with the candidate’s party; the Democratic version of the Senator was assessed as being more liberal while the Republican version was assessed as being more conservative. This treatment contains an issue position cue that should have lead participants to associate the Senator with the Senator’s party to a greater degree than did the participants who received the control treatment. These data suggest that the treatment was effective.

\[\text{For the Republican Senator: ideology} - 4. \text{ For the Democratic Senator: } -1 \times (\text{ideology} - 4). \text{ For the eleven point issue scales: position} - 5 \text{ for the Republican version of the Senator and } -1 \times (\text{position} - 5) \text{ for the Democratic version.}\]
participants’ ideological assessments of the Senator runs from -3 to 3 while the transformed issue assessments go from -5 to 5. These measures of perceived congruence serve as the dependent variables in my analyses.

I use ordinary least squares regression to model participants’ perceptions of the Senator’s congruence with his party ideologically and on issues that the Senator did and did not discuss. The independent variables in my models are a series of dummy variables indicating whether or not a participant received each of the eight experimental treatments. I do not include a dummy variable indicating whether or not participants received the control treatment because it functions as the excluded category with which I will compare the effects of the experimental treatments. Equation 1 represents the form of the models I report. I estimate separate models for each issue and the candidate’s perceived ideological congruence.

\[
\text{Ideological or issue congruence} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Treatment}_1 + \ldots + \beta_8 \text{Treatment}_8 + \epsilon \quad (1)
\]

The intercept of these models represents the average assessed congruence of the Senator made by participants who received the control treatment. The coefficients produced for each

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11 The ideological and issue congruence measures are seven and eleven point ordinal scales respectively. Ordered models may be more appropriate given the form of these data, but I chose to use linear models for three reasons. First, linear models with dummy variables are substantively equivalent to a series of difference of means tests. Second, results generated by a linear model are easier to present in a straightforward manner than are those from an ordered model. Third, I replicated my analyses using ordered logistic regression and found the same substantive results as the linear models I report below.

12 I also ran two different sets of models, the results of which may be found in the appendix. In the first, I included a dummy variable indicating whether or not a participant shared their partisanship with the Senator and interacted this indicator with each of the experimental treatment dummies. These models tested the extent to which partisanship conditioned the effects of the treatments. The results of these models suggested that the partisan perceptual filters of participants did not affect their responses to the treatments.

In the second set of models, I included a measure of education and interacted it with the treatments in order to ascertain the degree to which my treatment effects were conditioned by participants’ levels of educational attainment. These models suggested that education sometimes had a conditioning effect, but not consistently across treatments in the various models. However, when education did condition response to the treatments, it magnified participants’ responsiveness to the issue ownership and issue position cues, i.e. the better educated exhibited more powerful responses to the treatments.
dummy indicate the average additive effect of the treatments on participants’ perceptions of the Senator’s congruence with his party.

2.4 Expectations

I expect to observe that the cues contained within the statements in each experimental treatment lead participants to alter their views of the Senator relative to the views expressed by those who received the control treatment. When a message contains an issue position cue, I expect participants to respond to it by viewing the candidate as more like the party associated with the positions the candidate takes. When a message contains only an issue ownership cue, I expect to observe that citizens view the candidate are being more like the party that owns the issue that the candidate discusses.

Table 3 summarizes the expected signs of the treatment dummies’ coefficients. Positive coefficients indicate that the average effect of a treatment should shift assessments of the Senator in the direction that is congruent with the Senator’s party. This means that a Democratic Senator would be assessed as being more liberal ideologically and on issues while a Republican Senator would be viewed as being more conservative. Negative coefficients, on the other hand, indicate that the average effect of a treatment shifts assessments of the Senator away from that which would normally be expected of his party. In other words, a Republican Senator would be viewed as being more liberal and a Democratic Senator would be assessed as being more conservative.

[Table 3 about here.]

More specifically, I expect participants who receive the “in-party ownership cues” treatment to assess the Senator as being more congruent with his own party ideologically and on issues than participants who receive the control treatment. If the Senator is a Democrat, this
means that assessments should shift to the left while they should shift to the right relative to the control group if the Senator is a Republican. I expect that participants who receive the “out-party ownership cues” treatment to shift their assessments of the Senator in the opposite direction; these participants should assess the Senator as being less congruent with his party both ideologically and on issues than did those who received the control treatment.

I expect that participants who receive a treatment in which candidates take positions on issues will view the candidates as being more congruent with the party associated with those positions. When the Senator takes positions that would normally be expected of Democrats (Republicans), participants should assess him as being more liberal (conservative) ideologically and on issues. I therefore expect that participants who receive both the “in-party ownership, congruent positions” and “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatments to view the Senator as being more congruent with his party than participants in the control group. I furthermore expect subjects who receive either the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” or the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” treatments to view the Senator as being less congruent with his party on issues and ideologically.

I expect that participants who receive the “competing ownership cues” treatment will respond to the party label of the Senator rather than to the ownership cues because they are processing information heuristically. Therefore, I do not expect those who receive this treatment to exhibit assessments of the Senator’s ideological or issue positions that differ significantly from those made by members of the control group. Finally, I expect those who receive the “competing position cues” treatment to process information systematically and thus ignore the congruent information, focusing instead on the surprising position cue. This means that participants receiving this treatment should shift their views of the Senator’s ideological and issue positions away from those suggested by his partisanship.
3 Results

3.1 Ideological Congruence

I report the results of the model estimating participants’ assessments of the Senator’s ideological congruence with his party in Table 4. These results are consistent with all of my theoretical expectations. Participants’ assessments of the Senator’s ideological congruence appear to be powerfully informed — above and beyond party labels — by consistent issue ownership and both consistent and competing issue position cues, suggesting that the perceptions of citizens should also be affected in the same way, at least among those who are exposed to messages containing these kinds of cues.

The mean and standard deviation of participants’ assessments of the Senator’s ideology were 0.46 and 1.76 respectively on a scale ranging from -3 to 3. The intercept of the model represents the average ideological assessment of the candidate reported by participants who received the control treatment. At 0.74, this coefficient suggests that people responded to the party cues embedded in this treatment by assessing the Senator as holding an ideological position roughly three quarters of a point on the seven point ideological scale in the direction suggested by the candidate’s party.

The coefficient for the “in-party ownership cues” indicator is positive and differs significantly from zero, indicating that when a Democratic (Republican) Senator talked about Democratic (Republican) owned issues, he was viewed as being more liberal (conservative). Similarly, the negative coefficient of the “out-party ownership cues” dummy also differs significantly from zero and suggests that on average, the people who received this treatment assessed a Democratic (Republican) Senator as being more conservative (liberal) when he
talked about Republican (Democratic) owned issues but did not take any positions. In addition, the size of this coefficient (-0.73) is nearly identical to that of the intercept (0.74), which indicates that the “out-party ownership cues” treatment negated most of the influence of the party cues on participants’ perceptions of the Senator’s ideological congruence with his party. In other words, this treatment on average lead participants to place the Senator at the center of the ideological scale and thus view him as an ideological moderate.\footnote{0.74 + (-0.73) = 0.01.}

These results also suggest that people used the information about the positions the Senator outlined in his statements when they assessed his ideology. Leaving aside the two treatments containing competing cues for now, when the Senator took positions on issues that were in line with his party, he was on average assessed as being more congruent ideologically with his party regardless of which party’s issues he talked about. The estimated coefficients for both the “in-party ownership, congruent positions” and the “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment indicators are both positive and differ significantly from zero. The coefficient of the former treatment on average shifts participants’ assessments of the Senator’s ideological congruence with his party even further towards congruence than do the party cues on their own (an additional 0.76 units more congruent than the control group’s average assessments of 0.74 on the seven point scale).

Participants who received treatments in which the Senator took positions in line with his opponent’s party on average viewed him as being less ideologically congruent with his own party. The estimated coefficients for both the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” and the “out-party ownership, incongruent positions” dummies are negative and differ significantly from zero. Both coefficients are quite large and overwhelm the effects of party cues. While participants who received the control treatment on average assessed the Senator as being more congruent with his party ideologically — 0.74 units on the -3 to 3 scale — participants who received one of these treatments on average viewed the Senator as being
virtually the ideological mirror image of the party cues only Senator — -0.67 and -0.89 units on the same scale.\textsuperscript{14}

The estimated coefficient for the “competing ownership cues” indicator is positive and, as expected, does not differ significantly from zero. There is no discernable difference between the assessments made by those who received this treatment and those who were in the control group. It appears that the vague and contradictory signals sent in this treatment canceled one another out or were, on average, ignored in favor of party labels.

The last coefficient, that of the “competing position cues” treatment indicator, is negative and significantly different than zero, which suggests that the people who were exposed to this treatment on average assessed the Senator as being less congruent ideologically with his party than did those who received the control treatment. The effect size of this treatment was about 72\% that of the party cues on their own.\textsuperscript{15} It appears that when exposed to two positions, one congruent with a candidate’s party and one incongruent, citizens on average either ignore the congruent information and only use the incongruent position when forming an attitude or the effect of the incongruent position overwhelms that of the congruent position.

3.2 Issue Position Congruence

Table 5 contains the results of the models estimating participants’ assessments of the Senator’s congruence with his party on the four issues that could have been discussed in the experimental treatments: health care, affirmative action, taxes, and national defense. Each of the dependent variables here range from least (-5) to most (5) congruent with the Senator’s party on a given issue. The intercepts once again represent the average placement

\textsuperscript{14}I generated these values simply by summing the intercept and the coefficient of interest together.

\textsuperscript{15}| -0.54/0.74 | = .72. I am making the assumption that the effect size of the party cues is equivalent to the difference between the effect of the control treatment and zero, or the midpoint of the ideological scale.
of the Senator by those who received the control treatment. Each intercept indicates that
the party labels in the control treatment lead participants to view the Senator as holding
positions on each of the issues the Senator could have discussed that was about one unit
away from the center of the position scale and towards the implied position of the party of
the Senator.

[Table 5 about here.]

The first row of results shows the effects of the “in-party ownership cues” treatment on
each of the four issues that the Senator may have discussed. Three of the four coefficients
are positive as expected, but none differ significantly from zero, thus indicating that this
treatment did not on average lead participants who were exposed to it to view the Senator’s
position differently than did those who were exposed to the control treatment. As shown
by the results in the second row, the “out-party ownership cues” treatment on average lead
participants to view the Senator as holding positions on these issues that were less congruent
with his party. The sizes of these effects across models ranged from 42% to 75% of the size
of the effects produced by the control treatment containing only a party label.16

The third and fourth rows of results show that the treatments in which the Senator took
positions that were consistent with his party — the “in-party ownership, congruent positions”
and the “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatments — produced results that
were consistent with my expectations. All eight coefficients are positive and six differed
significantly from zero, indicating that on average taking positions that were consistent with
the Senator’s party lead participants to assess him as being more congruent with his party
on these four issues. The sizes of the significant effects ranged from 42% to 72% of the effect
sizes produced by the control treatments.

16I am again assuming that the effect of the party labels is equivalent to the difference between the intercept
and the midpoint (0) of the issue position scale.
The results presented in the fifth and sixth rows of Table 5 indicate that the presence of position cues suggesting that the Senator held different positions than his party on the issues he discussed on average lead participants to view him as being less congruent with his party on each of the four issues. All of the coefficients produced by these treatments are negative and differ significantly from zero. The effects that these treatments produce are also all larger than those generated by the control treatment’s party cue.

The results in Table 5 also indicate that the treatments in which the Senator containing competing cues had effects on participants’ views of the Senator’s positions on the four mentioned issues that are consistent with my expectations across all four of the models. None of the coefficients produced by the “competing ownership cues” treatment in row seven of the table differ significantly from zero. These findings are consistent with a heuristic information processing model in which participants rely on party labels rather than the ownership cues embedded in the treatment. The coefficients produced by the “competing position cues” treatment are all negative and differ significantly from zero. In other words, participants who received this treatment on average viewed the Senator as holding positions on these issues that were less congruent with his party. This finding is consistent with a systematic information processing strategy in which participants took note of the position cues and responded to the incongruent information more so than they did to the congruent information. Note however that while the sizes of these effects are important — between 0.52 and 1 units on the -5 to 5 scale — they are not as large as the effects produced by the two treatments containing only incongruent position cues.

Table 6 contains the results of two models estimating participants’ views of the Senator’s congruence with his party on two issues that were not mentioned in any treatment: abortion and government provision of services. These results are also largely consistent with the

\[\text{The effects produced by the “competing position cues” treatment are between 28\% and 60\% the size of those produced by the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” and the “out-party ownership, incongruent positions” treatments.}\]
expectations derived from my theory; only one coefficient — that generated for the “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatment — exhibits an unexpected sign and it does not differ significantly (p ≤ .05) from zero. The dependent variables here again range from least congruent (-5) to most congruent (5) with the Senator’s party and the intercepts show that on average, the presence of the party labels in the control treatment lead respondents to view the Senator as being 1.24 to 1.43 units more congruent with his party in relation to the midpoint (0) of the measures.

[Table 6 about here.]

As indicated by the first row of coefficients, the “in-party ownership cues” treatment on average leads participants to view the Senator as being more congruent with his party on average than does the control treatment, but the effects do not differ significantly from zero for either issue. The estimated coefficients for the “out-party ownership cues” treatment in the second row of results are negative and differ from zero at a traditional level (p ≤ .05), indicating that this treatment leads people to view the Senator on average as holding positions on these two unmentioned issues that are less congruent with his party. The effect sizes for this treatment on participants’ views of the Senator’s congruence with his party on abortion and government provision of services are 65% and 48% of the size of the effects produced by the party cues embedded in the control treatment\(^\text{18}\).

The third and fourth rows of results show that the “in-party ownership, congruent positions” and “out-party ownership, congruent positions” treatments — those in which the Senator talks about issues and takes positions that are associated with his party — do not alter participants views of the degree to which he is congruent with his party on abortion. They do, however, alter participants’ assessments of the Senator on government provision

\(^{18}\)\(|-0.93/1.43| = .65 \text{ and } |-0.6/1.24| = .48. \ I \ am \ once \ more \ assuming \ that \ the \ effects \ of \ the \ party \ labels \ in \ the \ control \ treatment \ are \ equivalent \ to \ the \ difference \ between \ the \ intercepts \ and \ the \ midpoint \ (0) \ of \ the \ issue \ position \ scales.
of services. Relative to members of the control group, participants who received one of these treatments viewed the Senator as holding a position on this issue that was less congruent with his party. The effect sizes of these treatments were 56% and 41% respectively the size of the effect produced by the control treatment’s party cues.

The results in the fifth and sixth rows of Table 6 show that participants responded to the “in-party ownership, incongruent positions” and “out-party ownership, incongruent positions” treatments by assessing the Senator as being less congruent with his party on the two unmentioned issues. All four estimated coefficients are negative and differ significantly from zero. In addition, a comparison of these coefficients to the intercepts shows that the size of each treatment’s effect is larger than that of the party cues embedded in the control treatment.

Neither of the coefficients generated by the “competing ownership cues” treatment shown in the seventh row of results differ significantly from zero, once again indicating that participants who received the treatment did not on average view the Senator differently than did those who received the control treatment. This represents additional evidence that citizens receiving these kinds of messages may rely on a heuristics-based information processing strategy. Finally, the eighth row of results show that the “competing ownership cues” treatment on average induced participants to view the Senator as holding positions on the two unmentioned issues that were less congruent with his party than did those who received the control treatment. The effect sizes produced by this treatment were both approximately 62% of those produced by the control treatment’s party cues. This further suggests that citizens who receive these kinds of messages make use of a systematic information processing technique and thus are more responsive to the incongruent information than they are to the congruent information. Note once again that these effect sizes are not as large as those produced by the treatments containing only incongruent position cues.
Taken as a whole, these results suggest that citizens respond to the information cues embedded in candidates’ messages by altering their views of candidates. Citizen responsiveness to issue ownership and issue position cues appear to be fairly consistent across views of a candidate’s ideology, positions on the issues candidates talk about, and even positions on issues that candidates do not talk about even in the presence of powerful party cues.

In addition, citizens who are exposed to messages containing different types of competing cues respond in different ways in the manner predicted by their mode of information processing. When candidates discuss but do not take positions on issues owned by different parties — “competing ownership cues” — citizens are left with two ambiguous bits of information which likely increases their degree of uncertainty about candidates and thus rely on a heuristic-based approach and make use of easier to understand party labels rather than ownership cues. Citizens who are exposed to more explicit competing cues in which the candidates take positions that are associated with both rather than a single party — “competing position cues” — appear to process information more systematically and form attitudes about the Senator in large part in response to the surprising and incongruent information embedded in the treatment.

4 Conclusion

This research adds to our understanding of the process by which citizens form attitudes about candidates during campaigns. Citizens use consistent issue ownership and both consistent and competing issue position cues to form reasonable inferences about where candidates stand on the issues they discuss. Citizens also use these cues to infer where candidates are positioned on issues candidates do not talk about. Finally, citizens use these kinds of cues to make more general assessments about the ideological dispositions of candidates.

The findings presented in this research lead to four implications. First, this research
demonstrates that citizens may be more politically aware than the classic findings on public opinion suggest. Citizens appear to be able to sort through the information contained within political messages and process relatively small and subtle bits of information — issue ownership and issue position cues — in predictable ways. Citizens may not remember precisely why they view candidates in a given way because they discard information once they have updated their attitudes, but the impressions formed or altered by the discarded information remain.

The second implication is related to candidates and the strategies they employ during campaigns. Some candidates may find it advantageous to alter citizens’ views of their ideological and issue positions in order to maximize their chance of electoral victory. For example, a Democratic candidate running for office in a conservative district may improve her chance of winning if she discusses Republican-owned issues and/or takes Republican positions on issues, thus associating herself with the Republican Party and shifting citizens’ views of her away from the Democratic Party. Talking about Republican-owned issues without outlining her positions may be an especially advantageous strategy because doing so can alter citizens’ perceptions of her without tying her hands in the future on policy outcomes or position taking should she win.

The third implication relates to the importance of issues in electoral politics more generally. These results suggest that issue ownership extends beyond simple issue advantage; people associate some issues with parties and, in turn, those same issues with positions and ideologies. In addition, citizens recognize these relationships and take them into account when forming views of candidates. If citizens are able to recognize this connection, they should also be able to infer from their views of candidates’ ideologies and issue positions the kinds of policy outcomes they might observe should these same candidates win elected office.

Last, this research suggests that inconsistent and subtle informational cues may encourage
citizens to rely on heuristics to a greater extent than cues that are either consistent or both inconsistent and explicit in nature. Some candidates may find it advantageous to prompt citizens to think about them in terms of their party rather than their actions or the positions they have taken in the past. For example, a Democrat who has supported several unpopular bills may be better off obfuscating by talking about issues that are owned by both parties without outlining her positions rather than reminding citizens about her unpopular positions, thus leading citizens to think about her as they might a generic Democrat.

This research also leads to two points associated with how the presence of new issues may affect the way citizens view candidates. First, issue ownership cues can only exist if a party owns an issue, but many issues are not owned. Parties only come to own issues after their performance over time reinforces the notion that they are better able to offer solutions to problems related to those issues. This suggests that discussions of new issues cannot contain ownership cues because no party could own them yet. Second, how do positions on new issues become associated with parties? While it is possible that parties must consistently take cohesive positions over time in order for citizens to associate positions on issues with parties, it is also possible that citizens will infer that positions taken by Democratic candidates are liberal while those taken by Republicans are conservative. In other words, citizens may project the ideologies of the parties onto the positions their candidates take on new issues. These important questions present potentially fruitful opportunities for future research on this topic.

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19 A possible exception to this point is that candidates may try to frame new issues in terms of one or more existing issue dimensions. Candidates may, for example, try to connect a new issue to preexisting salient issues like national security or minority rights in order to create a frame that citizens may find more familiar.
References


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cue type</th>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Consistent</th>
<th>Competing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consistent position cues</td>
<td>Competing position cues</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>consistent ownership cues</td>
<td>Competing ownership cues</td>
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Table 2: Treatment Assignment

<table>
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<th>Out-party</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No positions</td>
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<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruent positions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruent positions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Expected Signs of the Treatment Dummies’ Estimated Coefficients Relative to the Control Group

| No positions | + | – | ns |
| Congruent positions | + | + | – |
| Incongruent positions | – | – | – |

Note: These expectations hold for both assessments of the Senator’s positions on issues as well as of his ideology. ns = not significantly different than zero.
Table 4: Perceived Ideological Congruence of the Senator with the Senator’s Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimated coefficient</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In-party ownership cues</td>
<td>0.44*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-party ownership cues</td>
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<td>(0.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consistent position cues</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-party ownership, congruent positions</td>
<td>0.76*</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-party ownership, congruent positions</td>
<td>0.56*</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Out-party ownership, incongruent positions</td>
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<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competing cues</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing ownership cues</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing position cues</td>
<td>-0.53*</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intercept</strong></td>
<td>0.74*</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

N: 1,978
BIC: 7,442.01

Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients and standard errors generated using ordinary least squares regression.
* = p \leq 0.05 (one tailed)
Table 5: Perceived Congruence on Mentioned Issues of the Senator with the Senator’s Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Health care</th>
<th>Affirmative action</th>
<th>Taxes</th>
<th>National defense</th>
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<tr>
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<td>(0.30)</td>
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<td>(0.24)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-party ownership,</td>
<td>0.87*</td>
<td>0.70*</td>
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<td>(0.24)</td>
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<td>0.71*</td>
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<td>(0.28)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
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<td>(0.28)</td>
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Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients generated using ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. 
* = p \leq .05 (one tailed)
Table 6: Perceived Congruence on Unmentioned Issues of the Senator with the Senator’s Party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Consistent ownership cues</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In-party ownership cues</td>
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<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.26)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.27)</td>
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<td><strong>Consistent position cues</strong></td>
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Note: cell entries are estimated coefficients generated using ordinary least squares regression. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. 
* = p ≤ .05 (one tailed)
(a) Generic candidates

(b) Congruent cues

(c) Incongruent cues

Figure 1: Issue Position and Issue Ownership Cues’ Effects on Citizens Views of Candidates’ Positions
Figure 2: Ideological Continuum