Research Statement

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My research agenda focuses broadly on campaigns, elections, and public opinion at both the national and subnational levels in the American context. My current research primarily centers on the importance of issues in campaigns, which has led to two complementary research agendas: how candidates interact with one another to shape each other’s issue agendas — the sets of issues they discuss — and how citizens react to the cues embedded in candidate’s statements about issues. While I engage these agendas in both my dissertation and in much of my other work, I also have research interests in other areas of public opinion and behavior like the electoral consequences of racial prejudice, policy congruence and trust in government, and citizen response to negative campaigning.

1 Dissertation

In my dissertation, I examine the formation and consequences of candidates’ issue agendas — the issues on which they focus during election campaigns. I argue that the choices candidates make about the issues on which they focus matter because they influence the criteria citizens will use to make their choice about which candidate to support on election day. While their choices of issues matter because they affect the dimensions on which candidates are judged, candidates also communicate various cues to citizens through their campaign messages. These cues contain information about the candidates’ ideological and issue positions. These informational cues can be communicated either explicitly or implicitly. All three of my empirical chapters are currently under review.

In my first empirical chapter, I examine issue agenda convergence in U.S. Senatorial elections. There are two schools of thought in the literature on campaign issue emphasis. One suggests that candidates should rarely if ever discuss issues on which their opponents are advantaged while the other posits that candidates should engage the issues their opponents discuss. Extant theories also predict that candidates will take their opponents’ behavior into account when forming their own strategies to a greater extent in more competitive elections. I offer an interactive theory of candidate issue emphasis in which I argue that candidates engage each others’ issue agendas in an attempt to neutralize the advantages their...
opponents may have on the issues. I also argue that candidates’ levels of responsiveness to their opponents should be conditioned on the competitiveness of their election; candidates should be more responsive to their opponents in competitive elections than in noncompetitive elections. I test my theory using advertising data from 146 gubernatorial and U.S. Senate campaigns and show that candidates in statewide races respond to their opponents and do so to a greater extent in competitive than in noncompetitive campaigns. These findings suggest that candidates respond to one another’s issue agendas, thereby engaging in dialogue across a range of related issues. This chapter has been invited to revise and resubmit to *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*.

My second and third empirical chapters focus on the consequences of these issue agendas; how do citizens respond? In chapter two, I use a survey experiment embedded in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to examine how the issues candidates discuss and the positions they take inform citizens’ views of the candidates’ ideological and issue positions. I argue that citizens respond to both issue position and issue ownership cues embedded in campaign messages. When candidates identify their position on an issue, they are communicating a position cue. When they do not take a position on a party-owned issue, they are instead communicating an ownership cue which suggests that the candidate is ideologically similar to the party that owns the issue that the candidate discusses. The results of my experiment suggest that citizens shift their assessments of candidates’ ideologies and positions on issues they talk about in response to issue position cues. Importantly, my findings also show that respondents’ views of the candidate’s positions on issues they do not discuss are affected in the same way. In addition, I find that a similar phenomenon occurs when candidates communicate ownership cues; when candidates talk about a party-owned issue but do not take a position, citizens respond by shifting their ideological and issue positional assessments of the candidate in the direction of the party that owns the issues. These results show that citizens respond to small bits of information — above and beyond party labels — when forming attitudes about candidates and implies that citizens may be more sophisticated that the extant literature suggests.

My third empirical chapter examines the manner in which citizens form attitudes about competing candidates who attack one another. I argue that when a candidate attacks her opponent, her statement contains both an explicit cue containing information about the target of the message and an implicit cue, which contains information about the sponsor of the message. Explicit cues should suggest to citizens that the target of an attack is ideologically extreme and holds untenably extreme positions on issues. Implicit cues, on the other hand, should lead citizens to believe that the sponsor of the message is the opposite of target. In other words, when a candidate attacks their opponent for being too liberal on one or more issues, citizens should view the target of the attack as being more liberal and as holding more liberal positions on issues than should those who were not exposed to the cue. Citizens should also respond to the implicit cue contained within the same message by assessing the sponsor of the message in the opposite fashion: by shifting their views of the sponsor’s ideology and positions on issues in a more conservative direction. Negative

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1See Petrocik (1996) for a primer on issue ownership and Egan (2013) for an update.
campaign messages, then, represents a two-way flow of information. I once again use data drawn from a survey experiment, this time one that I designed and programmed using the Qualtrics platform to collect data from undergraduate participants drawn from a subject pool. My results offer support for my theory by suggesting that participants alter their views of the targets of negative messages in response to explicit cues while simultaneously shifting their attitudes about the candidate who sponsored the negative ad in the opposite direction in response to implicit cues. This implies that negative messages may be more informative than positive messages because they contain information that citizens can use to form and alter attitudes about both candidates in an election.

2 Additional Research Under Review

In addition to my three empirical chapters, I currently have three additional papers under review. In the first paper, I examine candidate behavior in 93 U.S. Senate campaigns and offer the first test of issue convergence that accounts for the dynamic nature of campaigns. I argue that candidates should respond to their opponents increased emphasis of an issue by increasing the level of attention they devote to that same issue. Candidates should do so for a number of reasons: to differentiate themselves from their opponents by highlighting their positions on issues in comparison with opponent, to appeal to a wider array of citizens, and to undercut their opponent’s advantages on issues by altering the way problems relating to the issue are framed. I also argue that more competitive electoral environments should lead candidates to respond to their opponents at higher levels because competition leads to more salient campaigns, meaning that candidates must make a greater effort to appeal to the median voter and may wish to avoid being criticized by the news media for failing to talk about important issues. The results of my analysis offer strong support for my theory.

The second project is coauthored with Tom Carsey. We examine the issue agendas of candidates during both primary and general elections and pay special attention to the transition between these two stages of elections in U.S. Senate campaigns. We argue that candidates who feel electorally secure — i.e. those who do not face competitive primary elections — attempt to run a single seamless campaign in order to maximize their appeal to general election voters. They can do so by responding to the behavior of the candidate they believe is most likely to win the opposing primary to a greater extent than to the likely winner’s primary election opponents. Candidates who face competitive primary elections, on the other hand, should shape their messages with greater care in order to appeal to primary rather than general election voters. These kinds of candidates, then, should respond to a greater extent to their primary election opponents than they should to the candidate running in the opposing primary. Our findings largely support our theory; candidates appear to compete for the support of the median primary voter when their primaries are competitive and for the support of the median general election voter when their primaries are not competitive. This paper has been invited to revise and resubmit to *Political Communication*.

In the third paper, my former graduate school colleague Jason Windett (Saint Louis
University), Tom Carsey, and I examine how the racial context surrounding white citizens and the racial stereotypes held by whites about blacks affected their likelihood of voting for and the attitudes they held about Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential election. We show that racial stereotypes are a powerful determinant of vote choice and attitudes about Obama and that white citizens did not appear to consistently respond to the racial context in which they resided. This paper has been invited to revise and resubmit to *Politics, Groups, and Identities*.

## 3 Working Papers

I am currently working on a number of additional projects related to one another and to my dissertation in that they focus on the strategic decisions that candidates make and how citizens respond to them. In one, Jason Windett and I focus on the interplay between competing candidates’ negative advertising strategies and candidate support among citizens. We argue that candidates should respond to their opponents’ attacks on them by devoting a greater share of their own advertisements to attacks and that candidates should shape their negative advertising strategy at least in part as a function of their standing in the polls. In addition, we argue that citizens should respond to the candidates’ attacks on one another by shifting their support of the candidates. A preliminary analysis provides us with support for our theory. Using data collected by the Wisconsin Advertising Project on U.S. Senate and gubernatorial advertisements, we find that candidates increase the proportion of attack ads they run in response to increasing negativity in their opponents’ advertising in the previous week. We also find that some evidence that candidates alter their negative advertising strategy in response to their poll standing and that their poll standing changes in small ways in response to their advertising strategies.

I am also working on a number of additional projects focusing on public opinion and mass behavior more broadly. Justin Kirkland (University of Houston) and I are working on a paper in which we examine the connection between perceived policy congruence and trust in Congress among citizens. We argue that trust in Congress is affected by perceptions of policy congruence between citizens and their legislators and that this relationship is conditioned by whether or not a citizen’s party is the majority party. We find that the level of trust in Congress expressed by citizens’ whose parties are not in control of Congress is affected by their perceptions of the ideological distance between themselves and their members of the House and Senators. Citizens whose parties are in the majority, on the other hand, do not alter the degree of trust they report in response to the ideological distance between themselves and their representatives.

My graduate school colleague John Cluverius and I are preparing a paper in which we examine actual turnout behavior among North Carolina citizens through the use of a field experiment. We observe the effects of priming linked fate and racial threat attitudes among white, black, and Latino citizens through the use of direct mailing techniques similar to those used by others. We find that black citizens respond to the racial threat treatment by
turning out at greater rates and that both black and white citizens are more likely to turn out after receiving a nonracial mailing. Latino citizens do not appear to have responded to any of our treatments.

Greg Wolf — another graduate school colleague of mine — and I are nearing completion on a paper in which we examine the effects of ideological polarization in the electorate, polarization in Congress, and political participation on one another. We argue that as citizens become more involved in politics, mass ideology becomes increasingly polarized in response to the growing number of people who have come to hold stronger political preferences and Congressional polarization will decrease in response to an increasingly diverse active citizenry. We also argue that higher levels of mass polarization will lead to a more active citizenry because citizens will perceive that they have more to lose when citizens want increasingly disparate policy outcomes and this will increase mass polarization, which will in turn lead to more polarized members of Congress because polarized primary electorates should select ideologically extreme candidates. Finally, we argue that Congressional polarization should lead to a more polarized electorate by teaching partisans the “correct” positions on issues and should increase levels of participation in politics by making clear to citizens that the parties offer starkly different choices, thus giving partisans more of a reason to try to avoid the policy outcomes that might be brought on should their nonpreferred candidates win. Using measures of mass polarization and political participation drawn from the American National Election Studies and measures of Congressional polarization generated using the NOMINATE data, we find support for our theory.

My graduate school colleague K. Elizabeth Coggins, Tom Carsey, and I are working on a paper in which we examine the ways in which external political efficacy and partisanship condition the effects of negative advertising on citizens’ vote choices. We find that low efficacy independents become more likely to vote for candidates against whom the balance of negative advertisements are run while high efficacy independents behave in the opposite manner; by becoming less likely to vote for candidates that are the target of most of the negative advertising in an election campaign. We also find that partisans respond differently based on their level of external efficacy, though they do so in a more muted manner. Low and high efficacy Republicans behave in ways that closely mirror independents, but Democratic identifiers behave differently. Low efficacy Democrats are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate as the negative advertising environment becomes increasingly anti-Republican. High efficacy Democrats, on the other hand, are less likely to report having voted for a Democratic candidate as the balance of the negative advertising environment becomes more anti-Republican.

I also have two political methodology research papers underway, both of which are coauthored with Justin Kirkland (University of Houston). In the first, we explore the consequences of using factor analysis to measure latent independent variables. In our second methods project, we examine the proper interpretation and consequences of interaction terms in error correction models. The flexibility provided by error correction specifications that allow for the estimation of short-run and long-run effects makes the proper estimation of conditional effects difficult at best.
4 Future Work

I plan to extend my research on candidate assessment in several ways. First, I am in the planning stages of a project in which I will test the theory from my second empirical chapter using observational data. I will merge WiscAds data on candidates’ issue agendas with individual level data collected for the CCES and the American National Election Study (ANES). This will allow me to test the degree to which citizens alter their assessments of candidates in response to the issues they discuss.

I also plan a second and much finer grained examination of this phenomena which will require a great deal of time to get the appropriate data. I will recode the WiscAds data to better reflect the issue content of the ads. While the current release of these data indicate what issues the candidates talk about, they do not indicate what positions, if any, the candidates take. I will recode these data using each advertisement’s storyboard such that I will know which ads contain positions on which issues and whether the positions are liberal or conservative. I will also code for which issues are discussed in relation to which candidate, the sponsor or her opponent. Finally, I will code for the direction attributed to the sponsor’s opponent.

These data will allow for additional tests of my theories of candidate assessment as presented in chapters two and three of my dissertation. I also plan to use these data to examine candidate interaction in more depth. I will seek to answer the question of whether and to what degree candidates can induce one another to take positions on issues by attributing positions to their opponents. These new advertising data will also be of interest to scholars of campaigns, as they will present a more nuanced snapshot of candidate behavior.

Finally, Jason Windett and I are in the planning stages of a project in which we test the racial threat hypothesis using panel data to determine when and to what extent racial attitudes drove whites away from Obama during the 2008 primary and general elections. Chelsea Phillips (UNC-CH) and I plan to design a survey experiment in an attempt to gain leverage on the depth and breadth of racial prejudice among U.S. citizens. Christopher Clark (UNC-CH) and I are in the planning stages of a project in which we argue that citizens who express negative racial attitudes towards black Americans should also express higher levels of anti-government sentiment, lower levels of trust in government, and lower levels of political efficacy during Barack Obama’s presidential administration. Jon Kropko (Columbia University) and I are preparing an experiment in which we try to manipulate the proclivities of participants to engage in either directional or proximity-based thinking when assessing candidates. Last, I am planning a project in which I reassess the consequences of issue agendas both dynamically — the effects of candidate advertising behavior on candidate support over the course of campaigns — and electorally — how candidates’ issue agendas affect vote shares.

\footnote{Additionally, the 1998-2004 WiscAds data only codes for the first four issues that are mentioned in an advertisement. I will code for all issues.}