The Utility of Staying on Message: Competing Partisan Frames and Public Awareness of Elite Differences on Political Issues

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Abstract

Pundits, journalists, and citizens alike often bristle at the idea of politicians "staying on message," believing that the practice undermines democracy. Scholars have had little to say with respect to whether the issue frames the news media report politicians using to characterize public questions affect how individuals view political battles between Republicans and Democrats over time. In this paper, I explore how the consistency with which partisan political elites frame issues influences whether individuals see important differences between the two major parties. Examinations of content analysis of Newsweek's coverage of three issues (abortion, tax, and energy policies) from 1975-2000 suggest that as the two parties provide increasingly internally homogenous, but externally competitive issue frames, individuals are more likely to believe there is more than the proverbial "dime's worth of difference" between the two major parties. The evidence supports Sniderman and Bullock's(2004) theory of "menu dependence" in American politics.

KEYWORDS: framing, political parties, public opinion, conflict extension, menu dependence

In an editorial bemoaning the 1996 presidential campaign, the *Chicago Sun-Times* lamented that the uninspiring Clinton-Dole contest "is the fault of the "stay on message" mantra heartily adopted by both campaigns. Forget whatever concerns are on the public's mind, forget whatever questions the press asks, forget whatever issues the opponent raises – stay on message." The editorial goes on to claim that while the modern technology of 1996 was allowing us to communicate more than ever before, we were actually communicating "less and less."

It is not controversial to note that this trend in political communication has increased during the last decade, both during campaigns and the day-to-day business of governing, as partisan elites work to inform the public and to persuade them to think about issues in particular ways. Indeed, as E.E. Schattschneider (1960) famously argued, this is precisely what politics is about as those who can organize the scope of conflict, presumably by offering a consistently communicated message, are the ones who truly have power. Does this mean that the editorial page of the *Sun-Times* is right? Are there any public benefits when partisan elites exhibit message discipline? Or, does the "menu dependence" of public preferences in the United States have benefits (Sniderman and Bullock 2004)?

Sniderman and Bullock's "menu dependence" hypothesis that the ability of citizens to make consistent political choices is dependent on the organization of the menu of options provided to them implies that for political elites to be successful, they must find a good menu item and serve it as often as possible, despite the *Sun-Times'* protestations. In Sniderman and Bullock's view, the much-maligned American voters should be able to organize how they respond to political choices as long as the options presented to the citizenry are organized by political parties (p. 338).

Consistent with Sniderman and Bullock's (2004) approach is the "conflict extension" hypothesis (Layman and Carsey 2002; Carsey and Layman 2006) regarding the conditions under which people change their minds about issues to match the positions of their party and the conditions under which they leave their political party because a particular issue is of sufficient importance that changing one's mind is not an option. Carsey and Layman call the first process party-based issue change and the latter process issue-based party change. Awareness of elite differences on issues is a crucial step in both party-based issue change and issue-based party change (Carsey and Layman 2006). In other words, unless people know where the parties stand, that is, unless they have read the menu, they cannot be persuaded to adopt the party line on some issues or be driven into the arms of the other party because of other issues.

In this paper, I argue that by improving our understanding of the conditions under which people are likely to learn about party differences on issues, we improve our ability to predict, understand, and explain instances of party-based

issue change, issue-based party change, and no systematic change at all (Carsey and Layman 2006). Analyses of the influence of partisan elites' issue frames on abortion, tax, and energy policies from 1975-2000 on public beliefs about partisan differences demonstrate that staying on message encourages citizens to believe there are indeed important differences between Democrats and Republicans. The results suggest that partisan public debate in the marketplace of ideas plays an important role in the political behavior of the electorate. The results also point to both the importance of the contents and consistency of the electorate's "two-party issues menu" and offer some preliminary corroborating evidence to Carsey and Layman's account of the dynamics of policy preferences and party identification in the American electorate.

Contemporary American citizens regularly develop attitudes of varying extremity and certainty about many political issues, events, and elites without having much, if any, direct experience with them. It is difficult to imagine how citizens would learn about political issues were it not for the mass media. Even so, as Zaller (1996) notes, "it has proven maddeningly difficult to demonstrate that the mass media actually produce powerful effects on opinion" (p. 17). Indeed, the long-standing consensus for most of 20th century social scientific research regarding media effects is cast in Klapper's (1960) "minimal effects" hypothesis. As late as 1986, the eminent social psychologist William McGuire wrote that the *myth* of media effects persisted even though most empirical examinations of the mass media's influence on the public showed insignificant effects (Zaller 1996).

During the past 30, and especially the last 20, years, scholars have increasingly found that the media systematically affect public opinion, especially when it comes to phenomena such as agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Entman (1989), parroting a line from Cohen (1963), argues that "the media make a significant contribution to what people think – to their political preferences and evaluations – precisely by affecting what they think about," (p. 347). This claim has stood up to a variety of empirical tests (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Weaver 1991). These studies and empirical investigations like them find that issues ranging from unemployment, the energy crisis, and arms control have become important to the public after the issues had first received prominent coverage in the mass media.

Thus, the mass media are a crucial intermediary between elected officials and the public. Journalists' professional norm of objectivity regularly leads media outlets to provide arguments to "both sides" of an issue[1] (Downie and Kaiser 2002; Graber 2002; Schudson 2003). Since political parties provide structure for political debate (Schattschneider 1942, Sniderman 2000, Wright and Schaffner 2002), they are often the key players on each side of the issue in question in a

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[1] This, to the dismay of some media critics, occurs even when an issue has more (or less) than two sides.

particular news story (Hershey 1999). What is more, elite partisans make up a significant portion of the "official sources," those who are routinely relied upon in political news stories (Cook 1998). When these official elite sources disagree about an issue, the issue becomes (more) newsworthy, resulting in reporting of the conflict with care to provide a Republican viewpoint and the Democratic counterpoint.

By specifying the conditions under which media influence is expected, support for the agenda-setting hypothesis has blossomed (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Graber 2002; Weaver 1994; Baumgartner & Jones 1994; Iyengar & Kinder 1987). Of course, putting an issue on the public's agenda does not automatically make the public aware of any differences in the public policy preferences articulated by elite partisans regarding the issue. Once an issue is on an individual's agenda, awareness of partisan differences of opinion about the issue can be made clear by the way each party is frames the issue in news coverage.

A Focus on Framing

The claim that people's evaluations of issues are influenced by how they are characterized in elite discourse is not new in the study of politics, or even social science more generally. Scholars from as diverse perspectives as Kenneth Burke (1945), E.E. Schattschneider (1960), Murray Edelman (1988), and William Riker (1990) have theorized about how issues can be portrayed in ways that encourage specific opinions and/or actions. Empirical examinations demonstrating how opinion systematically and intelligibly depends on the way issues are framed by elites abound (Iyengar 1991; Druckman 2001; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Popkin 1991; Bobo and Kluegel 1993). Indeed, it is hard to imagine an issue that is not multidimensional, which means that a person may have several different (and often competing) considerations about it (Zaller 1992), each of which have the opportunity to be highlighted by elite political arguments.

Since Kahneman and Tversky's (1982) demonstration that framing the exact same information in a different way can affect the preferences people have regarding that information, several studies have demonstrated how framing affects public opinion (Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Kinder and Sanders 1990; Iyengar 1991; Nelson and Oxley 1999). Presently, political scientists and social psychologists alike widely accept the notion that the way in which citizens think about an issue depends on how it is framed. Typically, framing studies present one frame of an issue to a subject pool and assess the participants' opinions and then present another frame to either that same pool or another one and assess their opinions, finding that the different frames cause different opinions.

Sniderman and Theriault (2004) question this method of studying framing effects (see also Druckman 2004). As these scholars rightly point out, in order to

understand how citizens make choices about public issues, it is necessary for framing studies to account for the distinctive features of American politics that impact public choices. Without incorporating these into framing studies, we cannot be confident that framing matters in the real world.

In this world, political parties provide citizens the opportunity to choose between these competing values. What the majority of framing studies have not considered, then, are two key points. First, citizens may be more susceptible to framing effects under some conditions more than others (Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Druckman 2004; 2001). Second, since both major political parties in American politics tend to contest issues and because the news media's norm of providing objective coverage results in the reporting of two sides of the issue at hand, citizens are regularly exposed to *alternate* ways of framing issues, and thus have a choice regarding how they might think about it. Put simply, in the rough and tumble world of politics, citizens are exposed to a menu of different frames on the same issue that can vary widely with respect to the different issue positions available on which the public can place its order. Citizens can learn what is on the menu via the mass media (Graber 2000).

When frames are pitted against each other in front of the same population at the same time, as they typically are in news coverage (Graber 2000), the presence of competing frames diminishes, or even eliminates, framing effects (Druckman 2004). Additionally, the presence of competing frames can actually *strengthen* the linkages of mass belief systems (Sniderman and Theriault 2004). Sniderman and Theriault (2004) show, via an experiment, that by failing to acknowledge politics itself, framing studies have failed to discover that when citizens are exposed to partisan political debate, the linkages of mass belief systems tighten, and constraint between basic principles and issue choices increases when compared to the preferences of those exposed to political debate sans partisan labels.

While some of these recent studies have succeeded in "bringing politics back" into the study of framing, the conditions under which the *partisan* issue framing that is present in mass media coverage of politics can affect public opinion have gone, to the best that I can tell, unexamined. Since the reporting of political issues often relies on official sources that are labeled by party affiliation (Hershey 1999), thorough studies of framing's influence on public opinion should include systematic examinations of the partisan nature of issue frames. Partisan issue frames are issue frames that are attributed by the news media to a member(s) of a political party. We should expect individuals to become aware of party differences on issues after the news media have provided prominent coverage to that issue *and* reported consistent, competing partisan frames defining the issue.

Table 1 presents the logic, assuming prominent issue coverage, of when we should expect individual awareness of party differences on issues with respect to the one/two-sided nature of the debate and the consistency of the messages elite

partisans are reported to provide. Only when media coverage of an issue reports consistent, competing partisan debate at the elite level should individuals be expected to become aware of party differences on the issue (row 1, column 1 of Table 1). That is, framing should matter when partisan elites stay on message.

Table 1 – Predictions of Individual Awareness of Party Positions on Issues, Assuming Prominent Media Coverage

	Consistent Partisan Frames Reported	Inconsistent Partisan Frames Reported
Two-sided Debate	Awareness of Party Differences	No Awareness of Party Differences
One-Sided Debate	Awareness of Overrepresented Party's position, No Awareness of Underrepresented Party's Position	No Awareness of Party Differences

As shown in Row 2, Column 1, when party labels are present in media coverage of a prominently reported issue, but the coverage reflects a lack of elite debate (only Party A receives regular coverage), individuals should be expected to become aware of Party A's position on the issue; the party receiving prominent media attention. Individuals should not be expected to become systematically aware of Party B's position on the issue. Some individuals may infer that Party B naturally has an opposing position to the one advocated by the elite's on Party A's side of the aisle. Since issues are multidimensional, individuals who infer that Party B has a different position on the issue may assume any number of potential issue positions that oppose the other party. On the other hand, other individuals might come to believe that since no elite debate is being reported, no elite debate is present. This could lead the individuals to think that there is elite consensus on the issue. On an anatomically impossible third hand, individuals could believe that while Party A may not agree with the unified position advocated by Party B, the one receiving the lion's share of ink and airtime, there is no consensus about what Party A's position is or should be.

Looking at the first row and right-hand column of Table 1, when media coverage of a prominent issue regularly provides competing partisan positions

that are inconsistent within each party, individuals should not be expected to develop similar understandings of each party's specific position; thus, they also should not be expected to become aware of specific party differences on the issue. Individuals may be expected to undergo an "agenda-setting effect" associated with the rise in prominence of the issue in media coverage, but without consistent messages from each party, individuals should not be expected to become aware of specific party differences on the issue. The final condition is perhaps simultaneously least-likely and most-confusing to individuals. Here, one party receives a lop-sided amount of coverage on an issue, but neither party provides consistent messages via the news media on the issue.

Still, how do we know that framing has "mattered?" Framing effects are generally defined as occurring when framing the exact same information in different ways results in different opinions (Druckman 2004) *or* as when the position someone takes on an issue, and the reasons someone takes that position, change as a function of the way the issue alternatives are framed (Sniderman and Theriault 2004). I rely on the Sniderman and Theriault (2004) definition since partisan political elites do not have an incentive to try and frame the exact same information differently than their elite partisan counterparts in the opposite party.

Research Design

In order to understand how elite partisans' ability to stay on message affects citizens' awareness of important differences between Republicans and Democrats, I examined *Newsweek* magazine's coverage of abortion, tax, and energy policies from 1975-2000[2]. For each issue, I coded up to six issue frames per story[3], always noting the source of the frame, whether the source was identified as a partisan (and for which party), and whether the partisan frame matched the official party position on the issue as described in the party platform closest to the year the story was printed. Frames were coded as a party match if they were consistent with the party platform *or* if *Newsweek* specifically pointed out that a partisan elite's position on the issue differed from the official position of the elite's party.

Using Lexis-Nexis, I engaged in a "full text" search of every *Newsweek* magazine article and editorial[4] from 1975-2000 that contained the word "abortion." With the exception of articles and editorials referring to 'abortion and the arts'[5] I coded abortion-related frames for every story in *Newsweek* that

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[2] For complete information on the coding scheme, contact the author.

[3] Most stories, for each issue, contained three frames or less.

[4] From this point on, I will use "articles" as a global representation of articles and editorials.

[5] I did not code stories that mentioned abortion in the following contexts: 1.) letters to the editor; 2.) the character of a book, play, movie, or poem does or does not have an abortion; 3.) stories about other nations' abortion policies that were not related to the United States.

mentioned the word abortion. A total of 1,236 stories were coded. Those stories contained a total of 2,258 frames

For the tax policy issue, I searched, via Lexis-Nexis, every *Newsweek* magazine article and editorial from 1975-2000 that contained any one of the following phrases: "tax policy," "tax plan," "tax cut," "cut taxes," "raise taxes," or "tax hike." Initially, I searched for the words "taxes" or "tax." However, the results of the search produced a very high percentage of articles that were unrelated to tax policy in the United States and thus not coded. After trying several combinations of various words and phrases, I settled on the above list as one that provided a comprehensive accounting of stories about U.S. tax policy without forcing me, or the other coders, to sift through large amounts of unrelated stories. A total of 1,259 stories were coded. Those stories contained a total of 2,659 frames.

Finally, I engaged in a similar search with respect to energy policy. Using Lexis-Nexis, I conducted a "full text" search of every *Newsweek* magazine article and editorial from 1975-2000 that contained any of the following phrases: "energy policy," "energy plan," "energy crisis." A total of 483 stories were coded out of a possible 632. Most of the stories that were not suitable for coding were articles that described energy policy in another country. Illustrating the scattered ways of thinking about the issue, those stories contained a total of 1,458 frames.

Results

Figure 1 shows how the parties evolved in the consistency with which they framed the abortion issue from 1975-2000. Until the mid 1980s, political elites from both parties were (at minimum) equally likely to frame the abortion issue as a pro-choice issue or a pro-life one. It was not until Ronald Reagan's presidency that the Republican Party began to find a unified voice on the abortion issue. Reagan's own abortion-related frames, as reported by *Newsweek*, were strikingly consistent, whereas Congressional Republicans (notably, Oregon Senator Robert Packwood) lagged behind in framing their abortion preferences in ways that made it clear they generally opposed legal abortions.

On the other hand, it was Democratic members of Congress who were reported as offering pro-abortion rights frames during the 1970s and 1980s while Democratic President Jimmy Carter regularly wavered, offering inconsistent positions on the issue. Indeed, by the late 1980s, each party never fell below a 60% matching score and only rarely fell below 70%. In many years, every single Democratically-sourced abortion frame either matched the party's official position or was accompanied by *Newsweek* reporting indicating that the "mismatched" frame was inconsistent with the party line on the abortion issue. It is instructive to note that the Republicans most likely to offer abortion frames that

did not match their party's official position in the late 1990s and 2000 (the year of the lowest Republican matches in a decade) were unsuccessful presidential candidates like Republican John McCain.



Figure 1: Partisan Matches on Aborton, 1975-2000
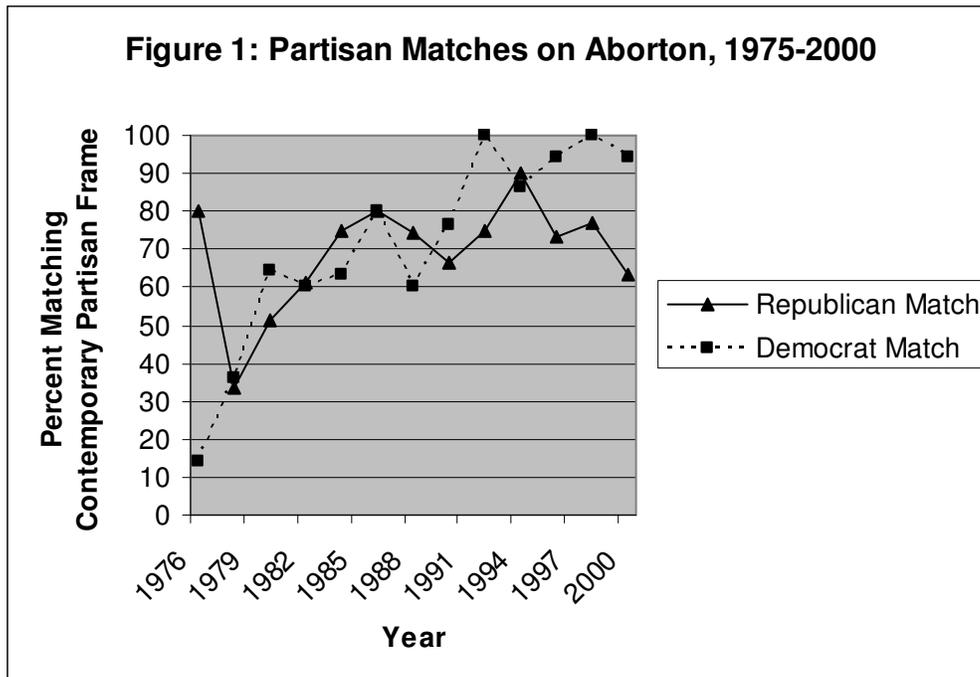
The abortion data comport with contemporary accounts of partisan change. Greg Adams (1989), James Stimson (2004), and Carmines and Woods (2002) all demonstrate the evolution of the abortion issue from one of elite confusion to elite clarity; once elites were clearly divided, partisan change in response to the abortion issue occurred for a significant portion of the electorate. What is crucial here is the sequencing of events. First, elites took clear, competing positions; *then* the public responded (see Figure 4). This suggests that individuals should become aware of elite differences on the abortion issue as elite partisans offer reported issue frames that match the official party position on the abortion issue.

Figure 2 illustrates that in comparison to the abortion issue, the period from 1975-2000 was one of relative unanimity within each party and one consisting of an ideological clash between the parties on tax policy. Each party hovers in the 80% range of providing issue frames about tax policy that are consistent with their official party positions on tax issues. This makes sense as debates over tax policy are a classic economic issue that has been consistently contested between Republicans and Democrats since the New Deal (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Shafer and Claggett 1995; Poole and Rosenthal 1998).

Energy policy, however, is a completely different story. Figure 3 looks more like a reading from a heart monitor than evidence from strategic politicians offering coherent policy positions. The frames offered by members of both parties bounce wildly from high degrees of partisan matching to low instances of consistent partisan issue frames. Typically, the years with the highest percentage of partisan matches were years where presidents did most of the talking about a small number of energy issues. It is important to note that energy policy was the most diverse with respect to the number of issues discussed; from the 1970s energy crisis, to natural gas prices, to environmental issues, and the like. Even when disaggregating the data by specific energy-related issues, the scattershot picture of partisan elites' framing of energy issues looks as it does in Figure 3.

Given the data presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, we should expect that as partisan elites' abortion frames became more consistent, the public becomes increasingly likely to believe that there were important differences between the two major political parties. The same should generally be true of the tax policy data. On the other hand, energy policy frames never exhibited a consistent pattern with either party, and thus, referring back to Table 1, should be expected to have no systematic affect on individual perceptions of important differences between the parties. Put simply, elite partisans stayed on messages with respect to taxes, got on message during the mid to late 1980s regarding the abortion issue, and never found a consistent message on energy policy.

Figure 2: Partisan Matches on Tax Policy, 1975-2000

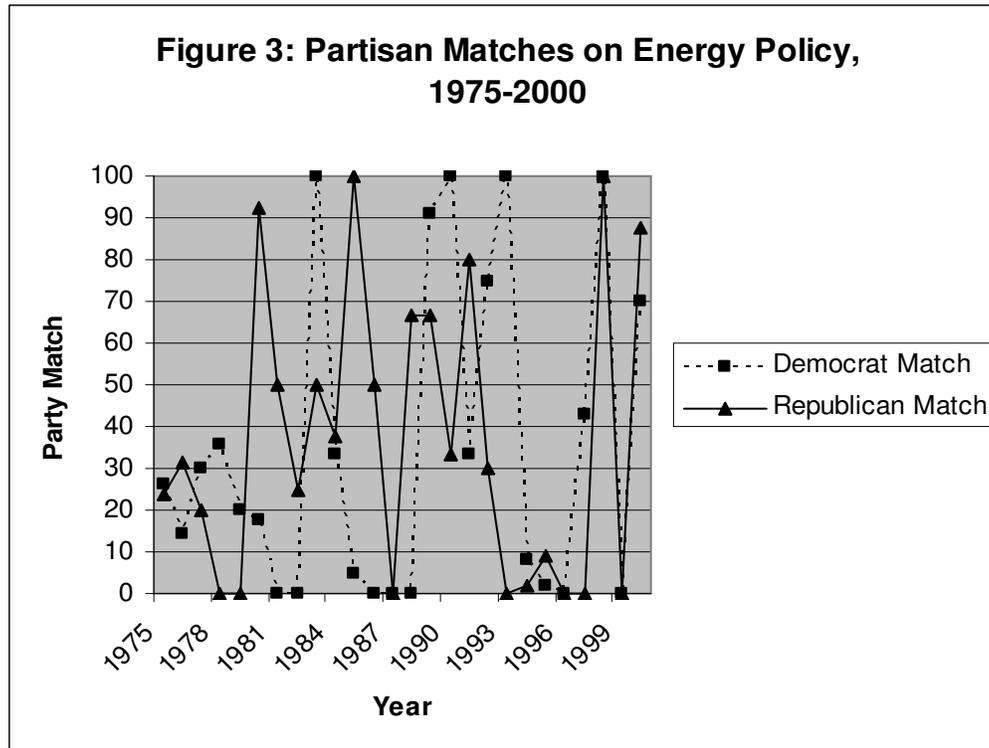Figure 3: Partisan Matches on Energy Policy, 1975-2000
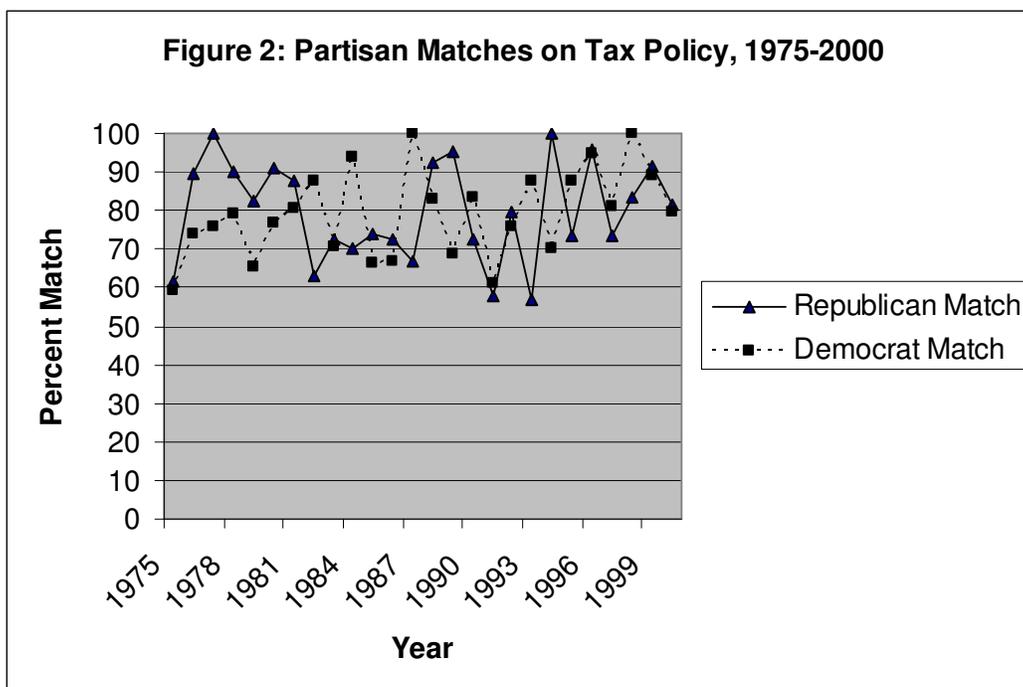
Table 2 presents the results of three random-effects time series logistic regressions, seeking to determine the factors that affect whether individuals responding to the ANES from 1976-2000 believed that there were important differences between the two major parties. The dependent variable is always a dichotomous variable coded with a 1 if ANES respondents felt there were important differences between the parties and coded with a 0 otherwise. The difference in each model is with respect to the Number of Stories, Republican Match and Democrat Match variables. In the left hand column, those variables contain the abortion data, in the middle column they contain the tax policy data and in the right hand column they contain the energy policy data.

What is crucial, from a measurement perspective, is the degree of change from year to year that partisan elites were reported to be using in issue frames that were consistent with their party's platform. Following Jones and Baumgartner (2005), I measured the change in the consistency with which partisan elites frame issues with respect to the party platforms by calculating the percentage of the total frames that correctly matched the party line (percent of frames in a given year that matched the party's platform) using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{(Time 2 Percentage of "party matches" – Time 1 Percentage of "party matches")}}{\text{Time 1 Percentage of "party matches"}}$$

Each unit of time is measured as two years, the time period between American National Election Studies. Thus, the degree of Democratic partisan matching for issue frames about abortion for the year 1990 would be measured like this: (76.7-60)/60 because Democratic partisan elites were reported to be providing issue frames consistent with the party's official position on abortion 76.7% of the time from 1989-1990 and 60% of the time from 1987-1988.

The other independent variables are the Number of Stories in each time period, Age (the age of the respondent), Gender (1=man, 0=woman), Race (1=white, 0=non-white), Education (the level of education achieved by the respondent), South (1=lives in the traditional South, 0=otherwise), Income, Interest (the respondent's interest in politics), Ideology (a 7-point scale from very liberal to very conservative), and Religiosity (the degree to which religion plays an important role in the respondent's life).

Starting with the data relating to the abortion issue, the analysis in Table 2 shows that as Republican and Democratic elites provided increasingly internally consistent, but externally competitive, positions on the abortion issue, individuals were more likely to see important differences between the two major parties, controlling for the other factors in the model. In many ways, the abortion issue is the perfect issue to explore here because public discussion of abortion began before the parties took internally consistent, but externally competitive positions on it. As the parties clarified their positions and communicated them via news outlets like *Newsweek*, the public responded to the parties for staying on message. Interestingly, the number of stories *Newsweek* reported about abortion had a negative influence on the dependent variable.

Additional factors contributing to the belief that the parties have important differences with each other included strength of partisanship, age, income, education, interest in politics, and ideology.

Moving to the second column, the analysis demonstrates that as Republican and Democratic elites provided increasingly consistent positions on tax policy, ANES respondents were more likely to believe that the two parties exhibited important differences with each other. With respect to taxes however, attention to the issue (Number of Stories) positively affected the dependent variable as well. One reason that may explain the difference between how the number of stories about taxes and the number of stories about abortion affect individual perceptions of important differences between the parties is that the tax issue was essentially settled at the elite level after the election of Franklin Roosevelt while the abortion issue did not become clear at the elite level until well into the Reagan years. Since the data analyzed only covers the period from 1975-2000, increases in the number

of stories about taxes, the bread and butter economic issue of the last 60 years, signaled the importance of well-known differences between Democrats and Republicans, even when controlling for the actual content of elite arguments in those stories. The control factors that were statistically significant in the abortion model were consistent in the taxes model.

Table 2 – Competitive Partisan Issue Framing's Affect on Whether Individuals See Important Differences Between Republicans and Democrats

	Abortion	Taxes	Energy Policy
Republican Match	0.173**	0.628**	0.699
	(0.04)	(0.14)	(0.746)
Democrat Match	0.085**	0.59*	0.078
	(0.016)	(0.233)	(0.212)
Number of Stories	-0.012**	0.011**	0.059
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.06)
Party Strength	0.388**	0.411**	0.053**
	(0.032)	(0.296)	(0.01)
Age	-0.097**	-0.077**	-0.011
	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.006)
Gender	-0.025	0.045	0.013
	(0.061)	(0.057)	(0.019)
Race	-0.018	-0.028	-0.011
	(0.037)	(0.274)	(0.009)
Education	0.251**	0.299**	0.021
	(0.037)	(0.034)	(0.112)
South	-0.003	-0.011	-0.007
	(0.065)	(0.062)	(0.011)
Income	0.076**	0.084**	0.064**
	(0.034)	(0.267)	(0.009)
Interest	0.171**	0.239**	0.314**
	(0.034)	(0.032)	(0.011)
Ideology	0.059**	0.067**	0.066**
	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.007)
Religiosity	0.273	0.017	0.037
	(0.26)	(0.025)	(0.008)
Constant	-1.08**	-2.962**	-1.01**
	(0.255)	(0.201)	(0.355)

*p<.05, **p<.01, Standard Errors are in parentheses.
Abortion, N=7307, χ^2=510.18**
Taxes, N=8081, χ^2=504.49**
Energy, N=8081, χ^2=539.84

The third column of Table 2 demonstrates that the number of stories about energy policy, as well as the partisan content therein, had no discernible affect on individual perceptions about important differences between the major parties. Looking back at Figure 3 and the expectations explicated in Table 1, this makes sense. Republican and Democratic elected officials never offered consistent frames for energy-related issues, discouraging individuals from making sense of where energy policy fit in American political debate.

The analyses in Table 2 provide initial evidence that as partisan elites stay on message with respect to their party's platform on issues where elite Republicans and Democrats disagree, the public notices. In other words, as the partisan menu becomes stable, with Democrats providing pro-choice arguments and Republicans offering pro-life frames, the public is more likely to believe the difference between the parties is greater than a dime's worth.

A Brief Look Ahead: Framing, Menu Dependence, and Conflict-Extension

Of course, individual awareness of differences between the two major parties is but an initial step in the process of understanding and explaining public attitudes and partisan change. Future work is needed to more fully understand what precisely is happening in Figure 4, which shows the evolution in partisan frames on abortion juxtaposed with the electorate's abortion preferences as measured by the ANES. In the 1970s and 1980s, citizens identifying themselves in the Republican and Democratic parties were equally likely to support abortion rights[6] while a clear shift takes place a few years after partisan elites began supply a Republican Pro-Life and Democratic Pro-Choice menu to the electorate.

If Carsey and Layman (2006) are correct, those Republicans and Democrats in the electorate who did not find the abortion issue to be particularly important should be more likely to adopt their party's view on the issue while those who attached a high level of importance to abortion are prime candidates for issue-based party change. The figure alone is not enough for us to tell which processes, both processes, or indeed neither processes are occurring. More work is needed to further elucidate how the presence of consistent partisan menus in media coverage of political issues affects the preferences and behavior of the American electorate.

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[6] The ANES abortion question changed in 1980 and while that causes problems for analysis of public opinion before and after the change, the fact that Republican and Democratic views within the electorate were virtually indistinguishable both before and after the change is useful to know for the purposes of this exercise.

Figure 4: Partisan Matching and Partisan Support for Abortion, 1975-2000
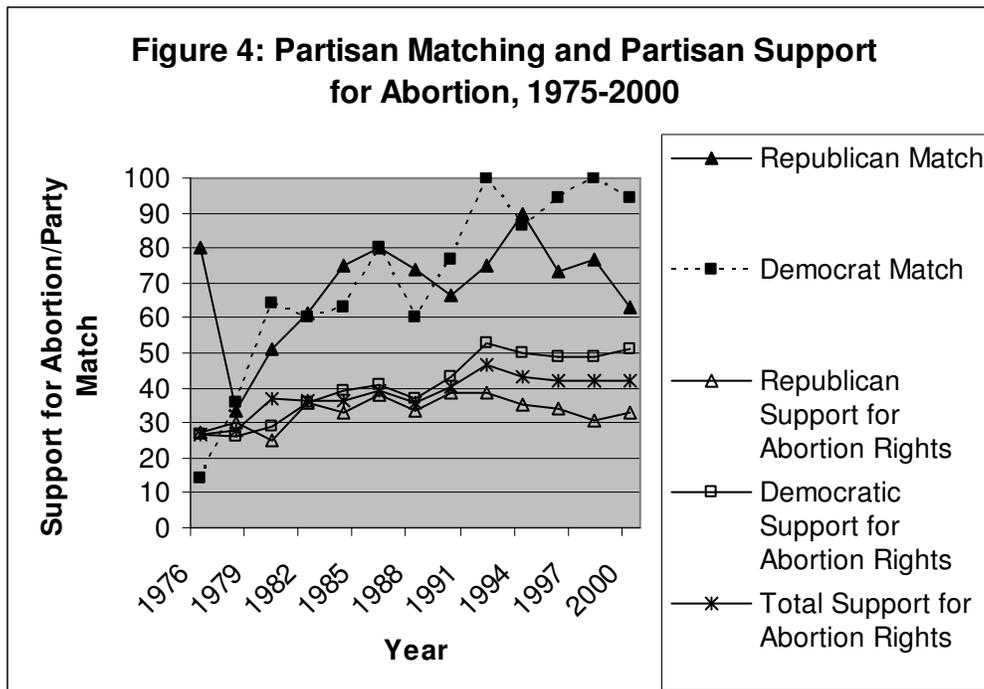
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