Avoidance or Engagement? Issue Convergence in U.S. Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000

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A widely noted and oft-decried characteristic of campaigns in the United States is the tendency of the competing sides to talk past each other—to avoid engaging with one another on the same issues. We bring a massive database on statements by the major-party presidential candidates and other campaign spokespersons in the 1960 through 2000 elections to bear on the question of issue convergence. Far from the exception, a high degree of similarity in the issue emphases of the two sides appears to have been the norm in these campaigns. This result suggests the need to rethink some influential empirical, formal, and normative perspectives on campaigns.

In a "textbook" political campaign—one that maximized citizens' opportunities to make informed and meaningful choices between the candidates who were vying for their support—the competing candidates would focus on the same issues. Otherwise, voters would find it difficult to determine which candidate's positions better suited their own set of preferences. To be sure, knowing which issues a candidate had chosen to emphasize could itself convey useful information to voters, but informed decision making presupposes, at the very least, an ability to compare the candidates' positions across the same set of issues. A pronounced tendency on the candidates' part to avoid issues that their opponents were emphasizing could only undermine that capacity.

This aspect of a campaign has come to be known as "dialogue" (Simon 2003), though we refer to it here as "issue convergence" because "dialogue" has so many denotations and connotations that extend beyond paying attention to the same issues. Issue convergence may facilitate informed decision making by voters, but by no means does it guarantee it. Even if the candidates did home in on the same issues, the result would not necessarily be a clear exchange of contrasting ideas. Their statements could be so vague or ambiguous that even a reasonably attentive citizen would be unable to understand where they stood— a problem exacerbated by the tendency of campaigners to concentrate on attacking their opponents rather than articulating their own ideas; or the competitors could speak precisely and unambiguously about the same issues while framing them so differently as to present voters with dueling monologues rather than a true dialogue. Moreover, even if the candidates spoke precisely and unambiguously about their own positions on the very same issues and framed them identically, their positions could be so similar as to offer voters no meaningful contrast.

It is often difficult for citizens to pin down where candidates stand on issues; presidential candidates in particular are "skilled at appearing to say much while actually saying little" (Page 1978, 153). This is not difficult to understand, for candidates' prospects for victory may depend on remaining ambiguous on potentially divisive issues (e.g., Page 1978; Shepsle 1972), framing issues in ways that forestall rather than encourage a meaningful exchange of ideas (e.g., Jacobson and Wolfinger 1989; Nelson and Oxley 1999), and attacking the opposition rather than staking out positions of their own (e.g., Riker 1996; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). Similarly, the drive to broaden their electoral base may lead candidates to tailor their positions to match those of the median voter (Downs 1957). In that case, the candidates would merely be "echoing" each other's positions rather than offering voters a clear "choice" (Barry Goldwater's formulation), and voters would be left to choose between alternatives that represent "not a dime's worth of difference" (George Wallace's formulation). In short, some of the factors that should enhance informed voter decision making—clear, unambiguous position taking by the candidates and a clash between the views they express on

important issues—are likely to be in short supply because they are counterproductive from the perspective of the candidates.

But what about the first of these factors, that of issue convergence—getting the candidates to address the same issues in the first place? As we show below, there is no shortage of explanations for *why* issue convergence is such a rare commodity in American campaigns. Perhaps surprisingly, though, there is a shortage of convincing evidence that issue convergence really *is* a rare commodity. Our purpose here is to document the extent of issue convergence in recent presidential campaigns. If we were to find that issue convergence has indeed been the exception rather than the rule in these campaigns, then we would have put the welter of existing explanations on sounder empirical footing; at least we could be more confident that all these explanations were vying to account for an actual phenomenon. On the other hand, if a high level of issue convergence in presidential campaigns turned out to be the rule rather than the exception, then some rethinking would be in order about issue convergence, or the lack thereof, in political campaigns, and more broadly about what is "wrong" with these campaigns.

The question, then, is the extent to which the attention of competitors for elective office converges on the same issues. Conventional wisdom, formal models, and casual observation agree that the norm is for opponents "to speak past one another, with one side addressing the other only when it is forced to" (Ceaser and Busch 2001, 47). As a consequence, campaigns are seen as falling to maximize voters' ability to make informed choices.

As we shall see, existing evidence concerning the accuracy of the image of campaigns in the United States as passages of ships in the night, with each side steering its own course rather than engaging the other in discourse, is surprisingly sparse. Thus, we draw on a massive database culled from newspaper coverage of the last 11 presidential campaigns to reexamine the extent of issue convergence.

Converging Perspectives on Issue Convergence

Motivating our analysis are two virtually identical but independently derived constructs: on the one hand, the "selective emphasis" thesis of Budge and Fairlie (1983), upon which Petrocik (1996) drew in developing the "issue ownership" thesis that Simon (2002) subsequently formalized; and on the other, the "dominance/dispersion principle" of Riker (1993, 1996), which Austen-Smith (1993) extended into an "orthogonal argument" model. The point

of departure for both ideas is skepticism about the idealistic image of campaigns as "great debates" in which the competing sides square off on the leading issues of the day (Budge and Fairlie 1983, 23). That image, skeptics contend, fails as a depiction of actual campaigns. In an academic debate or a courtroom trial, a judge compels the disputants to address the same issues. No such controls inhibit campaign discourse. Rather, as Riker indicates, "Each disputant decides what is relevant, what ought to be responded to, and what themes to emphasize" (1993, 83–84).

The fundamental premise of these interpretations is that each side naturally gravitates toward certain issues and away from others. Budge and Fairlie, for example, note that "One would not normally associate a left-wing party with upholding traditional religious and moral standards. This results in it playing such questions down, thus ceding 'ownership' of the issue to the right while emphasizing those appeals which the right cannot make. In the case of electors to whom traditional values are very important, this results in habitual voting for some right-wing party" (1983, 41). For Petrocik (1996), each side enters a campaign enjoying an advantage on (i.e., "owning") some issues due to the character of its constituency and the performance of the side that is currently in power. That being the case, it is rational for each side to try to keep the campaign focused on the issues that it owns and to downplay the issues that the other side owns. Motivated by a desire to win, each side chooses its campaign themes selectively, determining its optimal message mix according to the criterion of which themes will enhance its prospects.

The inevitable casualty is issue convergence. Because "no themes can work to the advantage of both candidates, they will never allocate resources to the same theme. Dialogue [in our terms, issue convergence] is defined as candidates discussing (spending money on) the same dimension, so rational candidates should never and will never dialogue" (Simon 2002, 64). Similarly, Riker's "dominance/dispersion principle" holds that "When one side has an advantage on an issue, the other side ignores it; but when neither side has an advantage, both seek new and advantageous issues" (1996, 105–06). The result is a "guarantee that most of the time opponents do not talk about the same things" (Riker 1993, 82) or, in Austen-Smith's terminology, that the competitors "will generally argue on orthogonal issues" (1993, 408).

In practice, the competitors may not push this strategy to its extreme limit, perhaps because ideological considerations compel them to speak out on certain issues even though it may not be in their interest to do so, perhaps because appearing side-by-side in campaign debates forces them to discuss issues they would prefer to avoid, or

perhaps because "the actual state of the world may make certain issues unavoidable" (Budge and Fairlie 1983, 129). The goal in these instances is to minimize damage while continuing to pitch one's own issues (Petrocik 1996, 829). Even though adherents of the accounts we have just summarized do not take literally the possibility that issue convergence would be totally lacking in campaign discourse (Simon 2002, 64), it seems fair to hold them to the expectation that it should be the exception rather than the rule.

The Existing Evidence

Do these accounts provide an accurate picture of what really happens in modern campaigns? Before offering our own answer to the question of whether mutual avoidance is the norm in campaign discourse, we need to assess the existing evidence.

To document their arguments, Budge and Fairlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996) catalogued references to various issues in presidential campaigns—Budge and Fairlie by focusing on attention to 27 policy issues in the Democratic and Republican platforms of 1920 through 1972, and Petrocik by coding *New York Times* coverage of candidates' statements on 14 issues in the 1952 through 1988 presidential campaigns. More recently, Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003), analyzing candidates' acceptance speeches and television commercials in the 1952 through 2000 presidential campaigns, reported that 52% of Democrats' issue mentions in television ads and 48% in acceptance speeches were on "Democratic issues," while the counterpart figures for Republicans were 67% and 69%, respectively.

Although the results of these studies are quite informative, none of these studies provided a measure of the degree of convergence or divergence between the competing sides in the attention they devoted to various issues. Rather, Budge and Fairlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996) highlighted the issues that each party emphasized, singling out some for attention as instances of convergence or divergence. Based on those instances, they concluded that each party had tended to emphasize issues on which it had an advantage over its opponent. Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) lumped numerous issues together as either "Democratic" or "Republican" rather than analyzing divergence or convergence in the two sides' emphases on particular issues.[1]

By contrast, both Simon (2002) and Kaplan, Park, and Ridout (2003) did attempt to measure the amount of issue convergence in modern election campaigns. Focusing on 49 U.S. Senate races in 1988, 1990, and 1992 and drawing on home-state newspaper coverage of the competitors' statements on 32 issues, Simon determined how much attention each position received on each issue in each race. This enabled him to create a measure of what he called dialogue, which he calculated for a given issue as the extent to which the overall attention that the two sides gave to the issue was dominated by one side or the other; to the extent that they weighed in equally on the issue, there was said to have been a dialogue on the issue. To create an overall measure of dialogue, he calculated the proportion of "minority" content across all the issues in the campaign. Across all 49 races, "minority" positions were staked out in only 21.8% of the newspaper lines in which the candidates' words were quoted or paraphrased (Simon 2002, 124, 108–09).[2] Thus measured, convergence on the issues was the exception rather than the rule in the campaigns that Simon considered. In their analysis of issue discussion in the television commercials of U.S. Senate candidates, Kaplan et al. (2003) pursued a similar measurement strategy. For a given issue, they measured dialogue (in our terms, convergence) as the difference in the frequencies of the two sides' mentions of an issue divided by the sum of these frequencies, all subtracted from 1. Thus, if the two candidates mentioned an issue 100 and 50 times, respectively, the dialogue score for that issue would be $1 - (100 - 50)/(100 + 50) = 1 - 50/150 = .67$. For some purposes, that measure might be serviceable, but for analyzing the candidates' issue-positioning strategies it is problematic. Suppose, as is often the case, that the first candidate was better funded than the second and was able to buy more airtime—to keep things simple, let us say twice as much. In that case, these two candidates would have devoted exactly the same proportions of their resources to discussing the issue in question. The first candidate would have run twice as many commercials and

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[1] Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen (2003) also presented some information on the two parties' emphases on particular issues, but because

they aggregated that information across campaigns, it is impossible to assess the degree of avoidance or engagement in any campaign. The exception is the 2000 campaign, for which Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen detailed the two sides' attention to 14 specific issues; we use their 2000 data later in this article when we assess the validity of the results we report.

[2] The figures given here are for Simon's "composite" measure, which combines "instant" and "sustained" dialogue; the former refers to the joint expression of "majority" and "minority" positions within a single newspaper article, the latter to the expression of positions over the course of the campaign that are not jointly expressed in a single article. Space considerations preclude a fuller description here of Simon's measures; without going into great detail, we have tried to provide an accurate depiction of his approach.

mentioned the issue twice as often. The two candidates' identical allocations of attention (i.e., their perfect convergence on the issue) would not be what Kaplan et al.'s measure recorded.[3] Because Simon (2002) seems to have employed essentially the same measurement strategy, the same criticism would apply to his measure as well.

Measuring Issue Convergence

Suppose we knew how much attention each side devoted to every potential issue in a campaign. We could first determine how much of its overall attention each side devoted to a given issue, ranging from 0% if it wholly ignored an issue to 100% if it focused exclusively on that issue. We could then plot each side's "attention profile" simply by arraying the various issues on the x axis and the percentage of its total attention that a side devoted to each issue on the y axis. Comparing these attention profiles would convey a sense of where the two sides converged or diverged. Because the overall extent to which their attention converged is exactly the question at hand, we would need a summary measure of how similar their attention profiles were.

Given this set-up, an appealing measure of issue convergence can be derived from the total block distance between a pair of attention profiles, i.e., the sum of the absolute differences between them. For example, assume that there were just three potential issues for the two sides to address and that the sides distributed their attention as follows:

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Side A	100%	0%	0%
Side B	0%	100%	0%

In this example, Side A concentrated exclusively on one issue, Side B focused exclusively on a different issue, and both sides ignored the third issue. Obviously, no issue convergence occurred during this campaign. Summing the absolute differences between the profiles would pro-

duce a difference of 200—that is, $|100 - 0| + |0 - 100| + |0 - 0| = 200$. These differences sum to 200 rather than to 100 because we double-counted them, first by determining how much of Side A's attention would have to be redistributed to match Side B's, and then by determining how much of Side B's attention would have to be redistributed to match Side A's. Of course, if Side A's profile remained unchanged while all of Side B's attention went to Issue 1, then the absolute differences would sum to 0—a case of perfect convergence. Between those two extremes, many other configurations would be possible. For example:

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Side A	60%	40%	0%
Side B	0%	40%	60%

In this case, the absolute differences would sum to 120: $|60 - 0| + |40 - 40| + |0 - 60| = 120$. Obviously, the closer the sum of the absolute differences to 0, the greater the similarity between the two sides' attention profiles, while the closer to 200, the greater the dissimilarity.

Based on these considerations, we measure issue convergence as:

$$100 - \left(\Sigma_{i=1}^{n} |P_D - P_R| \right) / 2$$

where P_D and P_R are the percentages of their total attention that the Democrats (D) and the Republicans (R) devoted to a particular issue, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues in a campaign. Dividing the sum by 2 calibrates the measure to range between 0 and 100, making up for the double-counting previously noted, and subtracting from 100 converts the measure to one of similarity rather than dissimilarity. Thus, a convergence score of, say, 40 for a campaign would indicate a 40% overlap in the two sides' attention profiles; in that case (which fits the last example in the preceding paragraph), in order to achieve perfect similarity between the two profiles (i.e., total convergence), one side or the other would have to reallocate 60% of its attention to match that of the other side.

To translate this measure into reality, we needed to determine how much attention each side devoted to every potential issue in a campaign. To do so, we focused on statements by campaigners for the two major parties in the eleven presidential campaigns of 1960 through 2000. We extracted these statements from the 10,286 news items published in the New York Times that referred explicitly to the presidential election. Collectively, the roughly 1,100,000 lines of Times coverage from which we extracted statements constituted everything that the Times published about these campaigns in its news sections from

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[3]Of course, the same point would hold if the measure were based on media coverage rather than ads. Only if the two candidates received the very same proportion of overall coverage (an unlikely prospect, especially in races involving incumbents or long-shot challengers) would this measure faithfully reflect the extent of convergence between the candidates in their emphases on the various issues in the campaign. A separate problem with Kaplan et al.'s approach is that their measure of the overall amount of dialogue in a campaign is simply an average of the issue-specific dialogue scores. This weights every issue equally, even though some were primary foci of a campaign while others were rarely mentioned.

Labor Day to Election Day in each presidential election year during the last four decades of the twentieth century.

Within these news items we identified every campaign statement, which we defined as either a set of verbatim remarks attributed to a campaign spokesperson, or a paraphrase thereof, on a particular campaign issue. For example, a news item may have summarized (with or without direct quotations) brief remarks that one of the presidential candidates made about Social Security in a speech delivered the day before. We would have recorded that as a statement in our database. The same news item may also have presented a lengthy analysis of the candidate's position on foreign aid, replete with direct quotations or paraphrases from his speeches, interviews, and press releases. We would have recorded that as a separate statement because it focused on a different issue. Campaign statements, thus understood, varied considerably in length, ranging from just a few words to several paragraphs, and a given news item may have contained several of them, just one, or none at all. Because our coding was not based on complete verbatim transcripts, it was not feasible for us to record the number of words or lines of text contained in a given statement; our working assumption was that over the course of a campaign, the number of times that a candidate or other campaign spokesperson was recorded as speaking to a certain issue would accurately reflect his or her degree of attentiveness to the issue.

Obviously, not everything that was said in the course of a campaign is represented in our database. Rather, we recorded what passed through the filter of the collective judgment of the New York Times, the nation's newspaper of record, about what was newsworthy. For example, if in the midst of a major policy address about education, a candidate alluded in passing to problems like crime, single-parent families, or drug use, those passing remarks would be not be part of our database unless the Times had considered them sufficiently important to command coverage in the space it had available for news of the campaign.[4] Incidental, offhand, and inconsequential references to off-topic points had been filtered out of our source materials, so every one of the statements in our database had passed what we consider a demanding test of its importance.

The 10,286 Times items contained 14,639 statements by major-party spokespersons for which the issue content was identifiable,[5] an average of 1,331 statements per

race; 7,405 (50.6%) were by the presidential candidates and 7,234 (49.4%) were by other campaign spokespersons (most frequently, the vice-presidential candidates). The substance of these statements ranged widely within and across races. Our 48-category catalogue (see the Appendix) included statements about issues involving the campaign itself (e.g., charges, counter-charges, and defenses concerning campaign tactics), the candidates (e.g., their physical health or their leadership traits), and policy issues (e.g., crime or national security). It also contained four miscellaneous categories (one for candidate issues not elsewhere classified, and one apiece for miscellaneous domestic economic, other domestic, and foreign policy issues); each of these residual categories was fairly diverse, but subdividing them would have been pointless because so few statements fell into them.[6] Because criticisms of candidates and campaigns for speaking past each other and ignoring "the issues" generally focus on policy issues, in what follows we concentrate on the extent to which the two sides addressed the same policy issues in particular, but we also note the extent of their convergence across the full spectrum of campaign, candidate, and policy issues. Because statements by presidential candidates are of particular interest, we single them out for special consideration as well as analyzing statements by all campaign spokespersons.

Results

What Are Presidential Campaigns About?

The content of campaign discourse varied considerably over the years. Some issues cropped up in virtually every presidential race, though their prominence varied greatly. In 1960, for example, both Kennedy and Nixon spoke often about national defense but seldom about Social Security, health care, taxes, or government spending. Forty years later, Bush and Gore reversed this pattern, dwelling on Social Security, health care, taxes, and spending while seldom addressing national defense issues. Other issues faded over the years; farm policy, for example, got considerable play in 1960 but almost none in 2000. Still other issues surfaced intermittently, the prime example being the wasted-vote argument, which one or both of the major parties invoked when a third-party candidacy threatened their hegemony.

Table 1 shows the attention that all campaign spokespersons in the 11 races devoted to the issues that garnered the greatest attention over the entire period. The

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[4] If such remarks were reported in the Times, then we coded them—in the hypothetical case given in the text, as separate statements.

[5] In 283 other statements, the Times referred to some otherwise-codeable aspect or aspects of a campaign statement but did not identify the issue content of the statement.

[6] The four miscellaneous categories jointly constituted just 4% of the statements analyzed here.

TABLE 1   Democratic and Republican Attention to the Seven Leading Issues, 1960–2000

	Issue												
	Credibility or Candor		Dirty Tricks		Ideology		Race-related		Social Security and Health Care		Taxing and Spending		National Security	
Year	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.	Dem.	Rep.
1960	4.6	3.5	7.1	6.1	5.9	3.6	4.7	6.5	4.8	3.1	1.3	3.4	14.7	21.2
1964	7.6	6.5	9.1	11.3	12.3	11.3	7.0	5.7	4.1	2.6	1.8	1.4	16.8	18.1
1968	8.5	6.8	7.8	6.3	6.5	3.1	10.5	5.3	1.3	1.2	.9	2.5	19.4	20.6
1972	4.8	7.2	16.0	10.2	5.6	3.5	2.9	4.0	2.6	1.1	3.7	7.0	15.7	19.5
1976	4.4	10.4	10.1	11.9	4.2	5.1	3.6	3.6	2.1	1.3	6.6	11.9	8.7	11.7
1980	6.0	3.3	9.7	9.3	2.7	1.1	7.7	5.7	4.9	2.7	2.7	5.3	18.5	14.9
1984	5.0	2.7	12.4	11.9	4.6	5.6	2.7	.8	5.1	2.9	7.7	12.5	19.3	17.0
1988	8.4	4.4	11.9	9.5	3.9	9.4	2.7	1.2	4.4	1.2	5.5	5.5	5.3	12.7
1992	7.1	9.1	9.7	9.9	1.8	1.7	1.0	.8	4.4	2.3	10.7	15.8	4.6	5.1
1996	3.1	8.8	13.0	13.1	4.5	4.9	1.4	2.1	7.9	5.7	9.9	10.8	2.0	4.2
2000	2.5	4.9	9.7	10.7	2.1	4.5	2.9	.7	14.3	11.7	10.1	10.2	3.8	6.1
Mean	*5.6*	*6.1*	*10.6*	*10.0*	*4.9*	*4.9*	*4.3*	*3.3*	*5.1*	*3.3*	*5.5*	*7.8*	*11.8*	*13.7*

Each cell entry is the percentage of all that party's statements during the campaign that were classified as falling into a particular issue category.

purpose of this table is simply to convey a broad sense of the data, not to pose a test of the interpretations that we outlined earlier; in the latter respect it is important to recognize that those interpretations all focus on *policy* issues, only four of which are highlighted in the table (race, Social Security and health care, taxing and spending, and national security).

Over the 11 campaigns, the leading issue was national security, the subject of approximately one out of every eight statements. The prominence of national security declined sharply after the United States's departure from Vietnam, reasserted itself in 1980 and 1984, and then languished in the low single digits in 1992, 1996, and 2000. Inattention to national security as a campaign issue coincided with the emergence of taxing and spending issues in 1992 and Social Security and health care in 2000. Also noteworthy are the near-invisibility of race as a topic in recent campaigns, the infrequency of overtly ideological appeals and attacks (except in the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater race), and the prominence of charges and counter-charges of "dirty tricks" in a campaign.

How Much Issue Convergence?

The key question, of course, is whether the two sides in a given race brought attention to bear on the same issues or avoided the issues on which their opponents were concentrating. The answer is that in every one of the 11 races, the issue convergence score on policy issues (that is, with cam-

paign and candidate issues removed from consideration) for the two parties' presidential candidates fell within 10 points one way or the other of 75 on the 0 to 100 scale; the mean was 75.3, with scores ranging only from 64.5 to 82.2 (see Table 2). For all campaign spokespersons rather than just the presidential candidates, scores averaged 76.5. On all topics rather than solely on policy issues, the mean for presidential candidates was 71.4, and the mean for all major-party campaigners was 76.4.

The variability of these scores was attributable in part to the closeness of a race. The two sides' attention profiles were somewhat more similar in the five campaigns that Sigelman and Buell (2003) classified as "fluid" than in the six "runaway" campaigns. Thus, being locked in a close race tended, to some extent at least, to encourage the competitors to focus on the same issues. The magnitude of these differences (which never averaged more than a few points) should not be overstated, but the differences were consistent enough to warrant attention.[7]

As we explained earlier, scores could range from 0 if the two sides focused on entirely different issues to 100 if their attention profiles were identical. The observed clustering of scores around 75 indicates that, on average, the attention profiles of the competing sides were three-quarters of the way toward perfect convergence. In a given

[7] For the four sets of comparisons in Table 2, the mean convergence scores for "runaway" and "fluid" campaigns, respectively, were: 73.0 v. 78.0 (p < .10), 75.1 v. 78.2 (n.s.), 68.7 v. 74.7 (p < .05), and 76.3 v. 76.5 (n.s.); the p-values are from F-tests for mean differences.

TABLE 2   Issue Convergence in Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000

| Year | On Policy Topics Only | | On All Topics | |
	Presidential Candidates Only	All Campaign Spokespersons	Presidential Candidates Only	All Campaign Spokespersons
1960	75.7	81.3	77.1	80.5
1964	70.9	77.9	72.0	80.3
1968	75.8	78.3	71.8	73.3
1972	79.8	77.2	63.3	72.5
1976	76.9	75.7	70.9	73.9
1980	79.2	74.8	76.1	76.7
1984	77.4	79.6	71.0	79.1
1988	71.7	70.8	69.5	72.4
1992	73.7	76.6	72.1	76.9
1996	64.5	68.7	64.3	76.8
2000	82.2	80.7	77.5	78.0
Mean	75.3	76.5	71.4	76.4
Number of observations	5,042	8,660	7,405	1,4639

The cell entries are convergence scores, which can range from 0 to 100, as defined in the text.

race, then, only about 25% of the Democrats' attention would have had to be reallocated to bring about a perfect match with the Republicans, or vice-versa. If we had collapsed the 48 issues or the 25 policy issues into broader categories, the scores would have been even higher, for what we counted as differences across separate but related categories would have been washed out. Thus, our use of many specific issues rather than fewer broad ones means that the scores given in Table 2 should be regarded as conservative estimates of the amount of issue convergence.

Of course, if we had employed an even larger number of more specific categories, the scores would have been lower, for some of what we counted as matches between the two sides would have turned into mismatches when finer distinctions were made. In this regard, we need to emphasize, first, that our categorization of issues was designed to produce a complete, accurate, and specific catalogue of the topics of discussion in the 11 campaigns, not to paper over any differences or trends in the data. Very few of the 48 issues encompassed conceptually separable subcategories, and (with one exception) the few that did were mentioned so rarely that they could not have had much of an impact on our issue convergence measure. Thus, the conceptual rationale for subdividing these categories would have been weak and the empirical consequences would have been minor.

The exception was the "national security, defense, war" category, which stood out in terms of both its breadth and its frequency. As a test of the extent to which this broad category artificially inflated the scores reported in Table 2, we selected four campaigns at 12-year intervals (1960,

1972, 1984, and 1996), recoded every invocation (555 in all) of the "national security, defense, war" topic by the presidential candidates into one of the twelve subtopics shown in Table 3, and calculated new policy issue convergence scores for the candidates in those four campaigns. In three of the four campaigns, the competing candidates' subcategory emphases closely tracked one another. The exception was 2000, when Bush and Gore displayed fairly distinctive profiles on national security subtopics. Even that disjuncture made virtually no difference, though, for Bush and Gore discussed national security issues so seldom that the impact on their issue convergence scores was trivial. For the three other campaigns, the differences were also minor. Based on these considerations, we think that overbreadth of categories can safely be dismissed as a major concern in assessing the results shown in Table 2.

Compared to What?

What should we make of the clustering of issue convergence scores around 75? It would be useful to have a benchmark or context for gauging these scores. Here we employ three such benchmarks.

Scores based on different data sources. It is possible that the scores we have just reported reflect biases or idiosyncrasies in our coding of campaign statements. One possible biasing factor would be that even the nation's newspaper of record is not immune to the media's tendency to reduce the complexity of campaigns by focusing on a relatively small number of themes and story lines. On that scenario, the *Times* would have reported on a

TABLE 3 Subcategorization of the "National Security, Defense, War" Issue for Selected Campaigns

Issue	1960		1972		1984		1996	
	Kennedy	Nixon	McGovern	Nixon	Mondale	Reagan	Clinton	Dole
Russia policy (economic aspects)	3	6						
Russia policy (military aspects)	45	68	11	8	75	33	3	3
China policy	19	29						
Vietnam/Southeast Asia policy	4		56	20				
Cuba policy	17	16						
Latin America policy other than Cuba	3	1			25	6		2
Middle East policy	2		2	1	43	16	4	10
Africa policy	6	1						
US military organization, troop levels, other Pentagon issues	2	3					1	5
Bosnia/Yugoslavia/Balkans policy								2
Chemical/biological weapons treaty							3	
North Korea policy								1
Total	*101*	*124*	*69*	*29*	*143*	*55*	*11*	*23*
Issue convergence score based solely on these "national security, defense, war" subcategories	*83.4*		*87.8*		*92.4*		*58.5*	
*"Original" policy issue convergence score**	*75.7*		*79.8*		*77.4*		*64.5*	
*"Modified" policy issue convergence score**	*72.8*		*75.9*		*77.0*		*63.2*	

*The "original" policy issue convergence scores are those given in Table 2 for the presidential candidates; the "modified" scores are the original scores recalculated with the "national security, defense, war" subcategories substituted in place of the category.

narrower range of issues than campaign spokespersons actually raised, in which case our reliance on *Times* coverage could have produced overestimates of the extent of issue convergence. We therefore considered it important to see how our estimates would be affected if they were based instead on data from other sources.

One step in that direction was made possible by Page's (1978, 158–59) comparison of the issue stands that the two major-party candidates took in the 1968 presidential campaign. Drawing on 162 speeches and statements by Nixon and 120 by Humphrey, Page recorded the number of explicit positions that the two candidates took in each of 33 domestic and foreign policy areas. The obvious counterpart in our analysis would be the 1968 entry in Table 2 for convergence on policy topics between the presidential candidates: 75.8. Recalculating that entry based on Page's data rather than our own produced a virtually identical score: 76.6.

As we noted earlier (see footnote 1), Petrocik et al. (2003) documented the issue emphases of the Bush and Gore camps in the 2000 campaign, reporting mentions of

fourteen different policy issues separately for the candidates' nomination acceptance speeches and the two sides' televised commercials. For nomination speeches, we calculated an issue convergence score for Bush and Gore of 81.3, very close to the 82.2 figure in Table 2. For television commercials, the score was lower (67.3), but certainly not at the opposite end of the scale from the score for all campaign spokespersons (80.7). The dropoff for television commercials was due almost entirely to the Democrats' extraordinarily intense advertising focus on health care, an issue on which they perceived themselves to be in an unusually advantageous position; health care alone accounted for 30% of the issue mentions in their ads but only 13% in the Republicans' ads.[8] Pomper (2001, 145) also profiled Bush and Gore's invocations of various issues, focusing on the "lead issues" reported daily in the *New York Times*. Drawing on his catalogue of seventeen issues, we calculated an issue convergence score of 76.4,

[8]That difference is, of course, exactly what the issue ownership and related perspectives would lead one to expect.

virtually identical to the counterpart figure of 77.5 in Table 3.

Though striking, the 1968 and 2000 comparisons pertained to only two campaigns, still leaving room for doubt about the broader validity of the results reported in Table 2. As a more extensive and more challenging validation test, we drew on the Manifesto Research Group's coding of statements in the Democratic and Republican platforms in every presidential election year, 1952–1996 (Budge et al. 2001: Appendix III and the accompanying CD-ROM). These data were especially apt for our purposes because, if anything, comparisons based on them should bias the measure of issue convergence *downward* by exaggerating the differences between the competing sides.[9] For benchmarking purposes, then, scores based on these data posed a hard test of the validity of our results.

The issue convergence scores for the 13 presidential campaigns for which the Manifesto Research Group coded the Democratic and Republican platforms did fall below those for our data. These differences were, however, relatively minor. Across the thirteen campaigns, the mean score for the benchmark data was 65.3 (s.d. = 6.2), just 10 points or so below the mean for the scores calculated from our data. In light of the likely downward bias of the manifesto-based data, we take this result as reassurance that the high levels of convergence evident in our data are not artifacts peculiar to our data or categorizations.

Intraparty similarity in consecutive campaigns. The similarity between a party's attention profiles in successive campaigns, i.e., the degree of intraparty continuity, constitutes a second benchmark. The basic idea underlying this benchmark is that the issues that each side emphasized during the last campaign are likely to serve as a base or starting point for the current campaign (Kollman, Miller, and Page 1992). The question, then, is whether the Democrats' attention profile in 2000, for example, had more in common with their own attention profile in 1996

or with the Republicans' attention profile in 2000. Even though conditions obviously change over a four-year time span, under normal circumstances it seems reasonable to anticipate considerable continuity in the issues on which a party campaigns in consecutive races; one basis for that expectation is the issue ownership thesis itself, which portrays each side in a given race as striving to exercise the ownership rights on issues it has acquired over time on various issues.

To measure intraparty continuity, we used the same formula as for interparty convergence. Table 4 shows the continuity scores. What stands out about these scores, beyond some intriguing fluctuations on the Republican side, is that they are generally *lower* than their interparty counterparts. The attention profile for presidential candidates, arrayed across policy issues, averaged a 67.5% overlap with the profile for the same party's presidential candidate four years earlier. This compares to the 75.3% overlap between the competing presidential candidates in the same campaign. Similar differences emerged for all campaign spokespersons addressing policy issues and for either presidential candidates or all campaign spokespersons addressing all the issues. Thus, the opposing sides in a given race were actually more similar to one another than either side was to itself in consecutive races—a result that we suspect will occasion considerable surprise.[10] The intraparty variability in issue emphases from one campaign to the next may, to some extent, reflect changes in the circumstances that spark concern about these issues (e.g., the advent of a new international threat in what had been a fairly stable environment, or an economic recession); to some extent, too, it may also reflect a determination on one side's part to avoid the electoral strategy that produced a loss the last time around, and/or on the other side's part to carve out a separate identity for its new standard bearer. In any event, whereas the issue ownership interpretation in particular points to the tendency of each side to return to more or less the same issues as it had concentrated on in the last campaign, the results shown in Table 4 reveal that tendency to have been less pronounced than the tendency of the two sides to converge on more or less the same issues in a given campaign.

The 0 standard. Of course, the most direct standard is given by Simon's characterization of the issue ownership model as "utterly proscrib[ing] dialogue in campaign discourse." That proscription implies a convergence score of 0. As we have seen, that implication is not even close to being borne out by the data, for on the 0–100 scale, the point around which the scores for the 1960 through 2000 races cluster falls nowhere near 0. To be sure, those who have

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[9]For one thing, platforms are issued before the general election campaign has even begun. Issues that a party highlights in its platform in order to appease a particular constituency often are downplayed once the campaign gets underway. For another, in the manifestos database many coding categories identify not only an issue but also the party's position on it (e.g., "Free Enterprise: Favorable mentions of free enterprise capitalism. . ." or "Nationalization: Favorable mentions of government ownership, partial or complete, including government ownership of land"). In some instances, "positive" categories are paired with "negative" ones (e.g., the mirrored categories for "Internationalism: Positive" and "Internationalism: Negative"), but in numerous instances they are not. For measuring issue convergence, this poses a problem: Even when two sides are addressing the same issue, their statements may well be shunted into different coding categories (e.g., "Free Enterprise" and "Nationalization"), depending on which position they favor. For present purposes, we combined the explicitly mirrored categories, which had the effect of reducing the number of categories from 56 to 43, but this was obviously only a partial solution.

[10]Difference of means tests established that all four of these differences were statistically significant (p < .001).

TABLE 4 Continuity in Campaign Themes, 1960–1964 and 1996–2000

	On Policy Topics Only				On All Topics			
	Presidential Candidates Only		All Campaign Spokespersons		Presidential Candidates Only		All Campaign Spokespersons	
Years	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
1960–1964	77.4	74.2	73.0	71.9	71.2	68.8	71.3	63.8
1964–1968	66.3	73.9	74.9	71.5	68.4	66.0	71.7	66.4
1968–1972	71.9	75.7	69.1	79.4	64.2	69.7	66.4	71.6
1972–1976	63.1	62.0	69.1	68.6	61.6	57.3	68.6	65.8
1976–1980	60.3	67.9	62.9	72.6	55.9	61.6	64.0	67.7
1980–1984	72.0	62.3	71.3	61.8	68.3	58.9	73.3	64.7
1984–1988	62.5	63.1	64.8	65.1	66.9	66.3	68.3	68.7
1988–1992	72.6	63.3	69.8	61.3	74.1	61.9	76.0	64.7
1992–1996	65.8	63.0	67.9	66.9	63.8	60.1	68.0	66.2
1996–2000	75.9	56.3	74.3	59.2	70.6	55.5	71.0	63.3
	68.8	*66.2*	*69.7*	*67.8*	*66.5*	*62.6*	*69.9*	*66.3*
Mean	*67.5*		*68.8*		*64.6*		*68.1*	

articulated the accounts outlined earlier have acknowledged that in the real world of campaigns, the two sides may find it impossible or even undesirable to avoid one another's favored issues altogether. Even so, what happens in presidential campaigns lies very far away from the total divergence point.

Discussion

The starting point of some prominent interpretations of campaigns is the assertion that the competitors normally do not address the same issues. Those who take that assertion as their starting point have a great deal of explaining to do; they have to be able to forge an account that spans the wide gap between what they take to be the norm of little or no convergence and what we take to be the reality of a great deal of convergence. Obviously, selective emphasis, issue ownership, dominance/dispersion, and orthogonal argument are of no use for this purpose, for they can only explain why so little, not so much, convergence occurs; they start at or near zero and provide no route to 75 on the convergence scale.

Based on the results given in Table 2, a more appropriate starting point is the assumption that the two sides will address the very same issues. For the limited purpose of accounting for deviations from that assumption, selective emphasis, issue ownership, dominance/dispersion, and orthogonal argument are well-suited—not as general accounts of what the competitors do in campaigns, but as residual accounts of why the convergence between the competitors is less than total. In other words, these ac-

counts provide a highly plausible route from a starting point of 100 back to the clustering of observed scores around 75.

The major remaining task is to account for what motivates the competitors to address the same issues. Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1994) "riding the wave" thesis provides one plausible answer. According to this interpretation, candidates need "to be seen as concerned, responsive, and informed" about "the major issues of the day" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, 337). Each side stands to gain by addressing the issues that rank highest on the public's agenda, or at least stands to be penalized for failing to do so. These issues come and go over the years.[11] It follows that each side should try to "ride the wave" of issues that the public considers especially important while downplaying other issues. Pursuing that strategy requires both sides to pay attention to the same issues.[12]

Other potentially fruitful bases for understanding the prevalence of issue convergence in presidential campaigns abound. One involves the notion of a tit-for-tat sequence in which an actual or anticipated "move" by one side

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[11] Smith (1980) documented "remarkable shifts" over three decades in Americans' rankings of the most important problem facing the nation, with public concern about civil rights and racial issues flaring during the mid-1960s and then fading rapidly and with concern about foreign affairs plummeting after the early 1970s as concern about economic problems was shooting dramatically upward.

[12] In an experimental test, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) concluded that candidates who focus on issues they "own" actually fare better than those who emphasize issues about which the public is especially concerned. However, the question here is what candidates do, not what works best for them if and when they do it.

sparks a countermove by the other side. The very fact that one side is emphasizing an issue may generate pressure on the other side to do likewise, producing a continuous process of mutual adjustment exemplified by the "instant response" teams that Clinton used to counter the Republicans' latest pronouncements.

Alternative accounts might concentrate on the role of the media in setting the issue agenda for a campaign and on the role of campaign debates in pressuring candidates to speak to issues they would prefer to avoid. Still another account might hearken back to Budge and Fairlie's (1983) idea that "the actual state of the world"—as manifested in the international system, the domestic economy, and so on—makes it virtually impossible for the competitors to ignore some issues and highly unlikely for them to emphasize others. All these accounts, and presumably others as well, need to be developed, differentiated, and tested.

It is important to bear in mind that we have focused on convergence on the issues on which the competing sides take positions, not convergence on the positions they take on these issues. The convergence we have documented may well have taken the form of superficiality, vagueness, or ambiguity rather than close reasoning and clear, precise articulation. Moreover, the contenders may have converged by scrambling to appeal to the median voter or, at the other extreme, by drawing unrealistically stark contrasts between themselves and the other side. The point is simply that when we recognize that issue convergence has been much more of a staple element of presidential campaigns than is commonly supposed, we leave open for future consideration many important questions about campaign discourse and its effects on voter decision making. Because the common assumption that only rarely do the competing sides even speak to the same issues should not be taken at anything approaching face value, concern about the nature and quality of what they say when they address these issues becomes all the more crucial.

Appendix
Catalogue of Issues

Campaign issues
Wasted vote
Campaign finances
Campaign debates
Propriety of campaign tactics
Propriety of appeals to voters
Negative campaign
Dirty tricks
Watergate
Fostering divisiveness

Candidate issues
Credibility/candor
Mental condition
Physical condition
Regional appeal
Social status
Past behavior
Current behavior
Personal finances
Corruption
Leadership style, record
Responsiveness to popular will
Patriotism
Ideology
Not elsewhere classified

Policy issues
Courts, judicial nominations
Federal–state relations
Crime-related, not race-specific
Race-related
Religion
Women's rights, abortion
Lifestyle, "hot button" issues
Poverty, welfare, urban issues not race-specific, excluding housing
Social Security, health care
Labor relations, workplace issues
Agriculture
Education
Domestic energy, environment
Taxing, spending, budgets
Employment levels
Industrial policy, development
Inflation, cost controls
Housing
Stagflation, misery index
Economic, not elsewhere classified
Trade, tariffs, embargoes, and other international economic issues
Foreign aid
National security, defense, war
Foreign affairs, diplomacy
Foreign policy, not elsewhere classified

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