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How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics
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Introduction

HOW ISSUE OWNERSHIP DRIVES AMERICAN POLITICS

In March 2012, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed a budget resolution that in some sense was decades in the making. Crafted by House Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan (R-WI), the plan spelled out cuts to the tax rates paid by many Americans and proposed the consolidation of taxpayers into just two income brackets. The corporate income tax rate would be reduced, too. Although the cuts would be accompanied by reforms designed to broaden the tax base and end distortions and loopholes, total government revenues over the next ten years would still be $2 trillion less than projected by the budget released a month earlier by Democratic President Barack Obama (House Budget Committee 2012).

The budget reflected an alliance between the Republican Party and anti-tax activists that by 2012 had spanned almost forty years. Long ago, Republican fiscal policy had been firmly anchored in the principle of balancing budgets rather than shrinking revenues. But this changed in the 1970s (Karol 2009). The marquee event signaling the party's embrace of the tax cut agenda was California's Proposition 13, which wrote strict limits on property-tax increases into the state's constitution when it was approved overwhelmingly by voters in 1978. The initiative's champion was Howard Jarvis, an activist who had been working hand in hand with state Republicans to craft tax limitation measures since the late 1960s. He found a natural partner in Governor

Ronald Reagan, who had sponsored a failed statewide measure to reduce income taxes as far back as 1973 (Sears and Citrin 1982).

Similar change came to the Republican Party outside of California in the 1970s. On the same day as the passage of Prop. 13, liberal Republican Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey was upset in his primary race by Jeffrey Bell – himself an activist for fiscal conservatism and a former aide to Gov. Reagan. And in Congress, Republican legislators were coalescing around a bill introduced by Sen. William Roth (R-DE) and Rep. Jack Kemp (R-NY) proposing to cut tax rates by about 30 percent across the board. Given little chance of passage when introduced in 1977, just four years later the proposal became the centerpiece of the sweeping tax cuts that Reagan pushed through Congress after Republicans captured the presidency and the Senate in the 1980 elections.

In seizing ownership of the issue of taxation in the 1970s, the Republican Party responded to a national consensus that until then political elites had never quite explicitly addressed: Americans want to pay lower federal income taxes. In 1947, the Gallup Poll began asking what has become a standard survey item about how Americans feel about their individual tax burden: "Do you consider the amount of federal income tax you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?" In the sixty-five times in which this question appeared on national polls through 2010, in only a handful of instances did the share of Americans saying their taxes are "too high" fall below a majority (Bowman and Rugg 2010).

Four times after Reagan's ascendancy to the presidency – in 1981, 1986, 2001, and 2003 – Republicans spearheaded sweeping overhauls to the tax code that included substantial cuts in income tax rates and other taxes. A notable exception to the party's tax-cutting fervor was the deficit reduction package agreed to by President George H. W. Bush in 1990, a bipartisan bill including tax hikes and spending cuts. The bill left conservatives up in arms; when Bush lost his bid for reelection in 1992, they pointed to this apostasy as the reason for his defeat. The party would not make the same mistake again. As noted approvingly by conservative Ramesh Ponnuru in 2012, not one Republican in Congress had voted for a broad-based tax increase since then (Ponnuru 2012). Americans took note: between 1981 and 2012, surveys found Americans consistently rating the Republican Party as significantly better able to "handle" the issue of taxes than the Democrats. Even Democratic President Bill Clinton's efforts to cut taxes for families with children and for the working poor in the mid-1990s did little to place a dent in the Republican Party's domination of the issue.

If the budget passed by the House Republicans in 2012 was decades in the making, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was the culmination of the work of generations. With its enactment in March 2010, Democrats achieved their long-held goal of extending health care coverage to nearly every American. It was a prize that Democratic presidents from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton had tried and failed to attain. President Barack Obama signed the bill into law on March 23 at a raucous ceremony in the White House East Room that was packed to the rafters with Democratic lawmakers and activists. Standing just over Obama's right shoulder was Victoria Reggie Kennedy – widow of Massachusetts Democrat Edward Kennedy, the passionate advocate of health care legislation, who died in 2009 after a forty-seven-year career in the U.S. Senate. Kennedy was part of a constellation of Democratic leaders whose commitment to the issue meant that nearly all of the major expansions of health care coverage at the federal level occurred under the party's watch. These included the creation of the Medicare and Medicaid programs, spearheaded by another Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson, in 1965; the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996; and a significant expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, in 1997.

Of the members of the Democratic coalition's efforts to expand health care coverage, one of the most critical elements was the labor movement. The AFL-CIO, for example, played an important role in organizing support for the establishment of Medicare in the 1960s. Through the decades, unions often also acted as health care's ideological gatekeeper. They helped kill a national health insurance plan in the mid-1970s for not going far enough toward universal coverage (despite its being cosponsored by Senator Kennedy); similar kinds of labor critiques led to a splintering of liberal support for Clinton's failed health plan in the early 1990s (Hoffman 2009). In 2008, health care was at the top of the list of issues motivating support for Democrats from labor groups such as the Service Employees International Union

(SEIU), which spent more than $16 million to support Obama in his campaign against Republican John McCain (Ortiz 2008).

The Democratic Party's association with the issue of health care was buoyed by a broad consensus among Americans that government resources and effort should be directed toward making health care affordable and effective. Since 1973, the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked Americans whether we spend "too much," "too little," or "about the right amount" of money on "improving and protecting the nation's health." In every one of the twenty-seven surveys administered by the GSS through 2010, a majority of Americans said we spend "too little." Since 1994, the Pew Research Center has asked Americans about their priorities for the president and Congress in the upcoming year; in every survey through 2012, a majority of Americans ranked health care–related concerns as a "top priority." As a result, the Democratic Party's dedication to health care made an indelible impression on the American public. Since 1945, when the Gallup Poll asked its national sample which party would better handle "improving the health of the people," Americans had long told pollsters they believed the Democrats to be the party better able to handle the health care issue – usually by double-digit margins over the Republicans. The Democrats' ownership of health care remained little changed even after a Republican-controlled Congress passed President George W. Bush's expansion of the Medicare program to cover the cost of prescription drugs for seniors in 2003.

Despite being about two different parties and two different issues, these stories bear obvious similarities. In poll after poll, survey research finds broad consensuses among Americans that – all things being equal – they endorse the goals of low taxes and improved health care. For decades, these issues have stood at or near the top of the list of priorities of the Republican and Democratic parties. Their prioritization is sustained by powerful activists who are so influential in party politics that it is difficult to tell where their domains end and those of their parties begin. And their clout yields results: in the four decades beginning with the 1970s, most of the major legislation cutting taxes passed because of Republican efforts; most of the landmark laws on health care were the work of Democrats. Last but not least, these issues are important political assets for the two parties: surveys conducted

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over the same period of time show that Americans consistently credit Republicans as better able to handle taxes and Democrats as better able to handle health care.

The two vignettes illustrate the kind of politics and policy making that accompany a set of issues found at the center stage of American politics. I call these *consensus issues*, and what these issues have in common is that – even in our era of partisan and ideological polarization – there in fact exist broad national consensuses regarding the ultimate goals associated with them. On health care, most Americans – including most conservatives – want to live in a society where people live longer, healthier lives at lower cost to the economy. The same is true for taxes, where most Americans (including liberals) want to pay lower taxes in a simplified, transparent fashion. These issues join others – such as the environment, crime, national security, and education – around which there is national agreement regarding ultimate end states. In one way or another, political scientists have been classifying issues like these together since at least Donald Stokes's introduction of the term "valence issues" five decades ago (Stokes 1963). But unlike previous work, here I set out clear criteria for categorizing these issues and identify similarities in public opinion across them. Americans of all ideological stripes think that the federal government is responsible for achieving each of these goals. They also agree to a remarkable extent that federal dollars should be spent on attaining these goals (including lower taxes, if we consider tax reduction as the "spending" of federal funds). Of course, there are obvious contradictions here, as constraints on government resources and lawmakers' attention prevent a simultaneous pursuit of all of these goals. Nevertheless, Americans agree that they are all important, and that responsibility for achieving them rests on the shoulders of the federal government.

Consensus issues engender a particular kind of politics. It is the politics of *issue ownership*: the long-term positive associations that exist between individual consensus issues and America's two political parties. Taxes join issues such as national security and crime as consensus issues that are "owned" by the Republican Party. The Democrats own not only health care but also other consensus issues such as education and the environment. Issue ownership has long intrigued scholars of politics: the term has had a place in the political science lexicon since it was introduced by British scholars Ian Budge and Dennis Farlie in

1983. The concept gained widespread attention among Americans with the 1996 publication of John Petrocik's pathbreaking study on issue ownership in the United States. A primary contribution of this line of scholarship has been to identify a valid way to measure the positive associations voters make between parties and issues with survey questions that abstract beyond specific policies and instead focus squarely on the parties' reputations for solving problems. To determine which party owns a particular issue, scholars have generally looked to the party that the majority of Americans name when they are asked a survey question such as "which party is better able to handle issue X?" More than 6,000 questions like these have appeared on national public opinion surveys over the past four decades. Much of the scholarship on issue ownership has been devoted to in-depth investigations of the hypothesis that political campaigns are battles between parties to raise the salience of the issues they own. As we shall see, political scientists' findings regarding this conjecture are mixed. Evidence that the parties emphasize different sets of issues as predicted by issue-ownership theory has been counterbalanced by research demonstrating that candidate messages instead tend to converge on issues that are important to the electorate.

Understanding how issue ownership shapes candidate messaging strategy is interesting and important, with tremendous empirical and normative consequences for the meanings we ascribe to campaigns and elections. But the literature's focus on campaigns has meant that a series of basic questions about issue ownership has gone unaddressed. Most glaringly, political scientists have been remarkably vague about what issue ownership actually means – that is, what causes parties to own issues in the first place. Many scholars have essentially thrown up their hands, defining issue ownership with the same hazy language used in the survey questions: voters' perceptions that one party is better able to "handle" a particular issue than the other. Researchers who have ventured tangible explanations for issue ownership have offered three possible sources for the enduring associations voters make between parties and issues. Some assume that issue ownership arises because Americans agree with the *policies* of the parties that own issues – for example, the tax cuts in the budget passed by the House Republicans in 2012, or the health care policies put in place by the Democrats' Affordable Care Act. Others have inferred that when

Americans say one party is better able to handle an issue, it is because that party has turned in a superior *performance* on the issue. Finally, still others have speculated that issue ownership finds its origins in the parties' issue *priorities* – such as the fact that tax cuts generally happen under Republicans and health care legislation under Democrats. Enfolded within the mystery of the meaning of issue ownership are three additional important questions. First, for what set of issues is the concept of issue ownership analytically germane? Second, is the parties' ownership of issues stable or transitory? Third, for all the attention given to issue ownership's role in campaigns, does it correspond with how the parties actually govern?

This final question signals that there may be much more at stake than previously surmised by scholars of issue ownership. The vignettes presented here about taxes and health care suggest that issue ownership in fact does tell us something about how the parties govern when they gain power in Washington. If this is the case, then the relevance of issue ownership extends far beyond the study of campaigns and elections. It can also yield important insights about political parties, citizens' preferences, and public policy. This raises more questions: Are voters assigning ownership to the parties accurately? Are the parties good stewards of the issues they own? Can voters keep the parties accountable on the issues they own?

In the chapters to follow, I explore all of these questions by undertaking a comprehensive investigation of the role of issue ownership in American politics. I begin by demarcating the notion of "consensus issues" in detail, and show that there is a surprisingly broad consensus among Americans – liberals and conservatives alike – for government spending and action on a wide range of consensus goals. I argue that the concept of issue ownership will be of limited relevance beyond these kinds of issues. Parties can unambiguously improve their reputations to the extent that they can associate themselves with consensus goals such as clean air, safe streets, and good schools. But the same is decidedly not true for divisive issues such as abortion, gay rights, or guns, on which no consensus on goals exists – and thus no partisan stance exists that burnishes a party's image in the same universal, clear-cut fashion as is possible with consensus issues.

I then carefully unpack each of the three hypotheses offered for the origins of issue ownership with simple spatial models showing how any or all of the explanations in the literature could logically comport with the electoral advantages accorded to owning salient issues in elections. As none of these possibilities can be ruled out a priori, identifying the source of issue ownership requires empirical investigation. I begin this by developing estimates of over-time issue ownership with a dataset consisting of the thousands of questions on issue ownership appearing on public opinion surveys over the past forty years. These decade-by-decade figures show that ownership on most issues has proven remarkably resistant to change: for the most part, the issues owned by the parties in the 1970s are the same ones they own today.

I proceed by testing each of the three issue-ownership hypotheses with data drawn from the domains of public opinion and public policy. I reject the first two hypotheses by showing that Republicans and Democrats deliver neither popular policies nor superior performance on their owned issues. Survey data show that Americans do not particularly like the policies of parties on the issues they own: for example, over the past few decades, the typical voter has actually been more likely to agree with the Republicans on jobs policy and with the Democrats on foreign policy. Objective indicators of national conditions on the parties' owned issues do not improve in any detectable ways when they are in power, and most Americans pay too little attention to these indicators to assign proper credit or blame to parties for their performance.

However, a series of tests provides decisive support for the priorities hypothesis. Surveys of Democratic and Republican partisans conducted over the past forty years – from the elites to the rank and file – show that they consistently list their parties' owned issues as higher priorities than other issues. When the parties come to power in Washington, these priorities are reflected in how they govern. Specifically, lawmaking and budgetary data show that the parties do exactly what Americans want them to do on their owned issues: enact major legislation and spend federal dollars designed to address consensus goals on the issues they own. These are the efforts Americans are recognizing when they respond to opinion surveys: year in and year out, they name the Democrats and Republicans as better able to "handle" the issues that the respective parties prioritize.

These analyses allow me to arrive at a conceptually clear, empirically documented definition of issue ownership. *Issue ownership* describes the long-term positive associations between political parties and particular consensus issues in the public's mind – associations created and reinforced by the parties' commitments to prioritizing these issues with government spending and lawmaking.

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With this definition in hand, we might conclude that issue ownership is a benign – or even beneficial – aspect of American politics. But the complete picture is not so sanguine. In this book, I also show that issue ownership weakens the relationship between citizens' preferences and public policies. Because party activists are especially ideologically rigid on their owned issues, the parties' lawmakers are significantly less responsive to shifts in public opinion in their policy making and spending allocations on these issues. Thus in addition to being an important driver of American politics, issue ownership also plays a distortionary role in our nation's public affairs. To see this, let us return to the two stories with which this chapter began.

Republicans, Taxes, and the Pledge

The budget passed by the GOP-led House in the spring of 2012 arrived amid a troubling increase in the size of the nation's deficit and nearly unprecedented levels of income inequality. For these and other reasons, polls indicated that the public overwhelmingly favored tax increases on the wealthiest Americans. For example, a CNN survey of American adults conducted that April found 72 percent favored requiring those making $1 million or more per year to pay at least 30 percent of their income in taxes. This was the so-called Buffett rule, named after its well-known proponent investment mogul Warren Buffett.

Yet the Republicans – the party that had owned the issue of taxes for the past forty years – refused to consider popular tax increases such as these. In fact, by most eyes, the party's budget did just the opposite. Its consolidation of tax brackets meant that the income tax rates paid by the wealthiest Americans would actually fall from 35 percent to 25 percent. Although the GOP budget also called for reforms that would simplify the tax system by ending many deductions and thus ultimately be revenue-neutral, it did not say what these reforms would be. Many independent analysts argued that closing the biggest loopholes – including eliminating the deductions for interest paid on home mortgages and ending the practice of shielding premiums paid for employer-provided health insurance from taxation – would in fact further shift tax burdens from the rich to the middle and upper-middle classes (e.g., Gravelle and Hungerford 2012; Toder and Baneman 2012).

Behind the party's resistance to any kind of tax increases were the very same activists who had propelled Republicans to ownership of the issue of taxes in the first place. By 2012, the anti-tax movement had matured into a set of powerful, immensely influential interest groups based in Washington, including a think tank (the Heritage Foundation), a political action committee (the Club for Growth), and – most prominently of all – the lobbying group Americans for Tax Reform (ATR). Founded at the behest of Ronald Reagan, ATR was best known for its Taxpayer Protection Pledge. Grover Norquist, ATR's powerful leader, devised the "Pledge" (as it became known in GOP circles) shortly after the group's founding in 1986. It committed its signatories to "oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rates for individuals and/or businesses" and required that any revenues gained from changes to tax deductions or credits be offset by reductions to taxes elsewhere. Thus the plan released by Paul Ryan and the House Republicans in the spring of 2012 reflected the near hegemony that the anti-tax movement enjoyed within the ranks of Republican elected officials. Of the 242 Republicans serving in the House of Representatives in 2012, all but 6 had signed the pledge; the same was true for all but 7 GOP senators (Americans for Tax Reform 2012).

For the few Republicans who wavered on taxes, there could be grave penalties. That May, Indiana Senator Richard Lugar – one of the few Republican legislators to forgo signing the pledge – became the latest to face the consequences of challenging the party's anti-tax orthodoxy. The senator's six-term incumbency came to an end after he was defeated by his Republican primary challenger, state treasurer (and enthusiastic pledge-signer) Richard Mourdock. Lugar began the race with a comfortable lead. But in the months leading up to the primary, the Club for Growth spent an estimated $1.7 million against Lugar (Sunlight Foundation 2012). Other conservative groups piled on, and the distinguished senator's numbers went into free fall. Just one week before the election, Norquist endorsed Mourdock. Lugar's refusal to