A longitudinal analysis of political issue ownership trends and shifts from 1970 to 2004

Many voters base their political election decisions on specific issues, such as the economy or health care. According to John R. Petrocik’s theory of issue ownership, the Democratic and Republican parties “own” certain issues in the minds of voters. That is, each party is perceived as better able to solve certain problems. This paper longitudinally analyzes public opinion polls from 1970 to 2004 to reveal any possible trends and shifts in voters’ perceptions of each party’s ability to handle major political issues. After collecting over 1000 public opinion polls from Lexis-Nexis on 13 major political issues, the data was put in a spreadsheet and charted using moving averages to determine trends. The issues analyzed were abortion, the economy, social security, taxes, national defense, the budget deficit, health care, unemployment, the environment, poverty, inflation, crime, and education. Analysis reveals that Democrats “owned” most of the polls on eight issues; Republicans had the advantage overall in five issues. This confirms the notion that political parties are seen as better able to solve certain problems. However, there are degrees of issue ownership. Only one issue was always “owned” by one political party (abortion by the Democrats). Also, Democrats maintained the lead in at least 90% of the polls on six issues, while Republicans had a similar lead on only one issue (defense). The remaining issues shifted from one party to another with more frequency. So, this analysis confirms the basic tenets of issue ownership theory. It shows there is a fair amount of consistency in ownership of some issues. Given a party’s tendency to campaign mostly on issues they are perceived to “own,” this type of longitudinal analysis can help us understand the relationship between political parties, issues, and voters.