



Taking official positions: How public policy preferences influence the platforms of parties in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Do political parties in the United States respond to public opinion when writing their official party platforms? Current research suggests a clear linkage between public opinion and party positions, with parties responding to public preferences, and public opinion responding to party messages. Drawing on existing research regarding the saliency/issue competition model of party position-taking, this study examines the specific effect of public opinion on party positions, positing that when a larger percentage of the public views a particular issue area as important, political parties will discuss that issue area to a greater degree in their official election platforms. To test this theoretical construct, we rely on public opinion data collected by Gallup, and normalized by the Policy Agendas Project, from 1947 through 2011, combined with content analyzed data regarding both the Republican and Democratic platforms from 1948 through 2012. Using OLS regression with a Prais-Winsten transformation and panel-corrected standard errors, we find support for the hypothesis that political parties discuss, in their platforms, issue areas that the public views as more important. Further, we find that this responsiveness does not appear to vary across political parties. These findings have important implications for our understandings of both political party dynamics and party representation in the United States. Moreover, these findings allow us to assess the health of American democracy.

Research suggests that policymakers, in the hopes of winning reelection, tend to be responsive to public policy preferences (see, for example, Miller and Stokes, 1963; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Stimson et al., 1995; Erikson et al., 2002; Wlezien, 1995, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2004; Jones et al., 2009; Bartle et al., 2011). While much of this literature looks at how policy outputs are related to public preferences, it has been noted that policymakers have multiple channels for policy responsiveness and that they tend to respond in ways that provide the least amount of friction (Jones et al., 2009). One channel for responsiveness to public attitudes that is open to elites, which is not explicitly discussed by Jones et al., is responsiveness through the alteration of political party positions.

As organizations that link voters to decision-makers (Dalton et al., 2011; Lawson, 1980), it is expected that political parties will respond to

voters' attitudes, preferences, and priorities. Research focusing on both European democracies, as well as the United States has found that political parties do, in fact, tend to respond to public attitudes, opinions, and preferences.³ Among the research regarding Europe, much of this work has focused on whether parties alter their official manifesto (i.e. platform) positions in response to public attitudes (Adams et al., 2009; Ezrow et al., 2011; Schumacher et al., 2013; Ezrow and Hellwig, 2014; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Williams and Spoon, 2015; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Spoon and Williams, 2017).

In the context of parties in the United States, the majority of the research has focused on party leaders, policymakers, or specific candidates' position shifts, and on candidate/party statements in advertising (see Erikson et al., 1989; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Sides,

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³ Importantly, research has suggested that the linkage between public opinion and party positions does not run unidirectionally. Rather, there is significant evidence to suggest that parties are responsive to public opinion, attitudes, and preferences, and that party messages can influence the salience of issues among the public, thus altering what issues the public is thinking about. (see Budge et al., 1987; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003).

2007; Banda, 2013), with far less research regarding the effect of public attitudes on the official platforms of parties. This is, in large part, because parties in the United States are popularly viewed as weak, and unconstrained by national platforms (see Ostrogorski, 1964).

Importantly, however, this view of parties as weak, and platforms as non-constraining, is not completely accurate. Research suggests that political parties in the United States both attempt to fulfill promises made in platforms, and are rather successful at doing so (Pomper and Lederman, 1982; Royed, 1996; Royed and Borrelli, 1997). This suggests that parties in the United States keep the promises made in platforms, and may even be constrained by the statements in their platforms. This, of course, begs the question, do political parties in the United States look to public opinion when writing platforms? Put more simply, do political parties respond to the public in taking official positions? It is to this question this study turns. Specifically, we seek to understand if political parties focus, to a greater degree, in their official platforms on issues that the public views as more important.

As political parties are a key linkage between the public and government, and they do attempt (in the United States) to fulfill campaign promises made in platforms, understanding the connection between public attitudes, opinions, and preferences, and official political party platform positions is pivotal for developing a clearer knowledge of representation in the US. Further, as democracy is predicated on the assumption that public wishes influence policy changes (Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1971; Powell, 2000), and political parties act as policymakers after elections, understanding representation in party positions allows us to more accurately assess the health of American democracy.

Drawing on the existing literature concerning political parties in both the American and European contexts (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Sides, 2007; Adams et al., 2009; Ezrow et al., 2011; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Williams and Spoon, 2015; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016), we argue that, in order to maximize votes, political parties in the United States seek to appeal to voters by discussing the issues that the public is most concerned about; the so-called “riding the wave” perspective (see Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). Thus, major political parties in the United States (i.e. the Republican Party and the Democratic Party) will dedicate more of their official platforms to those issues that a larger percentage of the public views as the most important problem in the country.

This theoretical expectation is tested using public opinion data drawn from Gallup surveys from 1947 through 2011⁴ and normalized by the Policy Agendas Project (PAP). Moreover, we use data originally developed by Wolbrecht (2016; as part of the PAP), who content analyzed all official national level Republican and Democratic platforms between 1948 and 2012, coding each quasi-sentence as belonging to a particular issue area. The findings of this study support the theoretical contention, suggesting that political parties in the United States do respond to public attitudes in writing official platforms, discussing to a greater degree the issues the public deems most important. Moreover, this responsiveness to the public is found to be similar for both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

This study proceeds as follows. First, we present our theoretical argument regarding party responsiveness in the United States, from which we derive our main hypothesis. We then discuss our data and methods. Finally, we present the results of our empirical analysis and conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for democratic representation in the United States, and the health of American democracy.

1. Public opinion and party position-taking

Within the literature regarding the relationship between public opinion

⁴ The Gallup data, normalized by the PAP, extends to 2015, however, the dependent variable in this study, which is derived from party platforms, does not extend beyond the 2012 election. Thus, we do not use the public opinion data from after 2011.

and party position-taking, there are two clear strands of research. The first of these is the spatial model of party responsiveness, made most famous by Downs (1957). Within this perspective, policy positions can be placed along a single dimension, often times understood as a left-right spectrum (also see Aldrich, 1983; Gerber and Green, 1999). It is argued that voters are normally distributed across this dimension, with the largest cluster of voters within one standard deviation of the mean.

Following the spatial model, the ideal party position for vote-maximization, in a two-party system, such as the United States, is the median position (or close to it; see Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Gerber and Lewis, 2004; Adams et al., 2009; Ezrow, 2010; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). This suggests that, in the United States, political parties will adjust their positions to move towards the median voter. Thus, as public attitudes move in one direction or another, it is expected that parties will shift their overall position to appeal to the largest group of voters possibly. Put simply, in the spatial model, “competition [is] a contest over party positioning with respect to voters, who minimize the aggregate distance between themselves and the party they vote for ...” (Rovny, 2012).

While the spatial model has been an important part of party studies for decades, more recently, research has developed the saliency, or issue competition model of party position-taking (see Budge and Farlie, 1983). Within this perspective, competition occurs not over a single dimension, but in multiple issue areas. Importantly, individuals can view different issue areas as more or less salient. For example, Person A may view macroeconomic policy as extremely important and environmental policy as relatively unimportant, while Person B may view environmental policy as extremely important and macroeconomic policy as relatively unimportant. Still further, both Persons A and B may view health policy as unimportant, while Person C views health policy as extremely important.

Within the saliency/issue competition model, two main perspectives exist. The first perspective, known as the “setting the agenda” perspective, argues that minimizing the overall distance between a political party and the median voter along an amalgamated ideological spectrum is far less important for vote-maximization than is emphasizing those policy domains in which a party holds a comparative advantage among the public (Rovny, 2012; Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). In essence, a political party, by emphasizing certain issues over which it holds an advantage among the public, and deemphasizing the issues over which the party is disadvantaged, can seek to change the national discussion (see Budge et al., 1987; Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik et al., 2003), and focus attention on those issues over which it is more trusted.

While the “setting the agenda” perspective is quite elegant, it should be noted that political parties do not maintain total control over the political agenda. For example, a significant body of literature suggests that the media can drive the political discussion (see Gilberg et al., 1980; Cook et al., 1983; Protesse et al., 1987; Wood and Peake, 1998; Edwards and Wood, 1999). As the issues that the public views as important can be exogenous to political party discourses, a bottom-up understanding of responsiveness becomes imperative. That is, the public does have preferences, which are not related to party statements and actions, and thus a party would find it necessary to shift their policy positions in the direction of public opinion to vote-maximize.⁵

This bottom-up perspective, also known as the “riding the wave” perspective (see Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016), argues that political parties will actually respond to the issue priorities of voters, thus signaling to voters that the party is concerned with the same

⁵ Importantly, we argue that party identification, while important at the individual level for maintaining party loyalty, does not preclude political parties from responsiveness at the aggregate level. This is partly due to the dealignment that has been seen since the 1980s (see Dalton, 1984; also see Dassonneville, 2018), and partly because large portions of the population do not maintain a strong party identification. Thus, while parties can rely on party loyalty derived from strong party identification to some extent, responsiveness to the public is still necessary to achieve vote-maximization.

issues.⁶ Political parties are rational actors that seek to vote-maximize (Williams and Spoon, 2015). In order to appeal to voters, parties should pay attention to the issue preferences and priorities of voters, taking positions and making statements to emphasize the issues that voters are most concerned with (also see Klüver and Spoon, 2016).⁷

As Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994, 337) write, “by [discussing] the major issues of the day, [parties] are more likely to be seen as concerned, responsive and informed.” At the same time, not responding can cause voters to view a party as not concerned with the issues the public is concerned with (Sides, 2007). In fact, recent research in the context of Europe has found that political parties do actually respond to public priorities in their manifestos in line with the “riding the wave” perspective (see Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). Based on the above theoretical perspective, as well as the existing empirical research in the context of Europe, one can hypothesize:

H1. Political parties in the United States will discuss more in their national platforms those policy areas that are more salient to the public.

2. Data and measurement

To test the above hypothesis, we rely upon both public opinion and party platform data collected and coded through the Policy Agendas Project (PAP). Specifically, we focus on 20 policy areas, macroeconomic policy, civil rights policy, health policy, agriculture policy, labor/employment policy, education policy, environmental policy, energy policy, immigration policy, transportation policy, law and crime policy, social welfare policy, housing policy, domestic commerce policy, defense policy, technology policy, foreign trade policy, international affairs policy, housing policy, government operations policy, and public lands policy. In the below section, we discuss the measures for our dependent, independent, and control variables, as well as our analytical strategy.

The dependent variable used in testing the above hypothesis is the attention paid to a particular policy area in each parties' platform in a particular year. This variable, which is derived from data initially collected by Wolbrecht (2016) through the Policy Agendas Project, is operationalized as the percentage of each major party's platform that is dedicated to a particular policy area. The PAP divided the platforms of both the Republican and the Democrats into quasi-sentences.⁸ Once divided into quasi-sentences, Wolbrecht (2016) used the standardized PAP major topic coding scheme to place each quasi-sentence into one of

⁶ The “setting the agenda” and “riding the wave” perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Political parties can attempt to both respond to the public, as well as drive public attitudes. While this study is mainly concerned with party responsiveness, rather than parties acting as attitudinal catalysts, we modeled the “setting the agenda” perspective (see Model A.1 in Table A1 of the appendix). In this model, the total percentage of statements dedicated to a particular policy area in the platforms of both parties combined was treated as the independent variable, with public opinion in the following year included as the dependent variable. We used OLS regression with panel-corrected standard errors and a Prais-Winsten transformation. The results suggest that the total percentage of statements dedicated to a particular policy area in the platforms of both parties is associated with a greater percentage of the public believing that policy area to be the most important problem facing the country in the next year. This effect is not curvilinear. The substantive effects are reported in Figure A1 of the appendix.

⁷ There are a number of different mechanisms that may communicate public preferences to parties. These can include, but are not limited to, public opinion surveys and polls, town hall meetings, interest group activities, and media coverage. Once these preferences are communicated, it would follow that, in order to appeal to voters, party elites would attempt include these issues when platforms are being written.

⁸ “A quasi-sentence is a set of words containing one and only one political idea.” (EES, 2009: 20).

the policy areas mentioned above.⁹ Importantly, for the purposes of this study, a party platform refers to the formal and official set of positions written by and endorsed by each political party prior to a Presidential election in the United States. This differs from the advertisements, press releases, and speeches given by candidates and even party leaders during the course of a campaign, which are not examined in this study.

This data covers every presidential election¹⁰ from 1948 through 2012. This variable has a theoretical range of 0 (no discussion of a particular policy area in a platform) to 100 (all statements in a platform concern a particular policy area). In the dataset, however, attention paid to a particular policy area ranges from 0.058% (Democratic attention paid to immigration policy in 1984) to 24.147% (Republican attention paid to international affairs policy in 2004). The mean for this variable is 4.813, with a standard deviation of 4.046.¹¹

The main independent variable used in testing the above hypothesis is the percentage of the public that believes a particular policy area is the most important problem facing the United States in a given year.¹² This data was originally collected through Gallup polls, with the PAP normalizing across multiple surveys in one year to develop an annualized percentage of respondents identifying a particular policy area as the most important problem facing the United States.¹³ Importantly, the PAP used the same policy area coding scheme as used in the coding of party platforms. Thus, the dependent variable and main independent variable are easily mapped to one another.

This PAP public opinion dataset covers 1947 through

⁹ Using this coding scheme allows us to more easily map platform policy statements to our independent variable, which is also derived from the PAP. Importantly, unlike data from the Comparative Manifesto Project, the data collected as part of the PAP (Wolbrecht, 2016) does not indicate if a statement is positive or negative, it simply places each statement into a category indicating if the statement is concerned with a policy area. As our hypothesis expects that parties will simply discuss a policy area more when the public cares about it, the PAP data is more suitable for the needs of this study.

¹⁰ As the national parties (i.e. Republicans and Democrats) do not write platforms for midterm elections, this study focuses only on presidential election years.

¹¹ Among the Republican Party, this variable ranges from 0.172% (immigration policy in 1972) to 24.147% (international affairs policy in 2004), with a mean of 4.800 and a standard deviation of 4.233. The range for the Democratic Party is 0.058% (attention paid to immigration policy in 1984) to 20.894% (attention paid to defense policy in 2004). The mean for the Democratic Party is 4.828, and the standard deviation is 3.856. For descriptive statistics for all variables in this study, see Table A.2 of the appendix.

¹² Importantly, there has been a debate about the best measure of public salience, particularly regarding differences between questions asking the public about the “Most Important Problem” facing a country, and the “Most Important Issue” facing a country. It has been argued that asking about the “Most Important Issue” may be a preferable to asking about the “Most Important Problem” as the “Most Important Problem” taps into the degree to which something is both important and a problem, while the “Most Important Issue” question represents only how important something is to the public. Research, however, has suggested that these two questions tend to be “[pervasively similar] in responses at particular points in time and over time,” (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011, 553). It may be interesting to examine how the results of this study may vary based on usage of these different instruments, however, there is reason to believe that the results would remain largely unchanged.

¹³ For descriptive statistics regarding the percentage of respondents identifying an issue area as the most important problem by year, see Table A.3 of the appendix. The data show that macroeconomic policy is always salient to a large segment of the population, save for a period in the 1950s and 1960s, and the 1990s. Additionally, defense policy, law and crime policy, and civil rights policy have also been salient to a large portion of the population at various times. In more recent years, health policy, energy policy, and government operations policy have also seen relatively high levels of public salience. For descriptive statistics regarding the independent variable by policy area pooled across time, see Table A.4 of the appendix.

2011.¹⁴ As party platforms are normally written prior to party conventions in presidential election years, the main independent variable, the percentage of the public believing a particular policy area is the most important problem, was lagged by 1 year. Thus, the measure of public opinion in 1947 was linked with the party platforms in 1948, the measure of public opinion in 1951 was linked with the party platforms in 1952, and so on. As the last set of platforms for which data exists is from the 2012 election, the public opinion data used in this study begins in 1947 and includes data at intervals of 4 years through 2011.

The theoretical range for this variable is 0 (no respondents view a particular policy area as the most important problem) to 100 (all respondents view a particular policy area as the most important problem). The range for this variable in the dataset is 0 (multiple policy areas in multiple years) to 61.212 (macroeconomic policy in 1984). The mean for this variable is 4.669, with a standard deviation of 10.203.

In addition to the main independent variable, a number of control variables are also included in the analysis. First, there are multiple reasons to believe that political parties will not devote their entire platform only to issues that the public is concerned with. For example, they may be attempting to “set the agenda” (see [Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994](#)). Further, political parties are concerned with vote-maximization, however, they are also policy-seeking actors ([Strøm and Muller, 1999](#)), and thus will dedicate portions of their platforms to the issues they are most concerned with. As such, a linear relationship between public perceptions of a policy area as being the most important problem and political party attention to that policy area in their platforms should not be expected.

Further, as a particularly large percentage of the public begins to view a particular issue as the most important problem facing the country, one may even expect to see a slight decline in the attention paid to that issue by each political party for two reasons. First, as a large percentage of the public agrees a specific issue area is the most important problem, the public may also agree on the best course of action for addressing that issue, in which case, there is little electoral advantage gained by the political parties in discussing this issue. Second, in cases in which the public does largely agree on what the most important problem is but differs on how to address the issue, party obfuscation becomes an appealing strategy for parties. Thus, discussing an issue to a lesser degree in an official platform allows parties to be vague in their policy proposals. As there is reason to expect a curvilinear relationship, we include a squared term of our main independent variable in our models.

Further, to control for the possibility that each party is responding to the attention paid to a policy area in the platform of the opposing party (see [Banda, 2013, 2015](#)), we include a measure of the percentage of the opposing party's most previous platform dedicated to each policy area.¹⁵ Further, as there may be differences in responsiveness among the parties, we include a dummy variable, indicating with a value of 1, if the party is the Republican Party.

To address the possibility of year effects, we also include dummy variables for year, using 1948 as the baseline. Importantly, these year dummy variables control for any exogenous shocks that might influence the statements made in party platforms, such as wars or recessions.¹⁶

¹⁴Data is missing for the year 1955. These values, however, were linearly interpolated based on values in 1954 and 1956. A similar procedure was used by [Jennings and Wlezien \(2015\)](#) for missing polling data. As a robustness check, the models were run excluding party platforms from 1956. The results were nearly identical (see Model A.2 in Table A.5 of the appendix).

¹⁵Models in which contemporaneous opposition party platforms were included rather than lagged platforms were also tested. The results are nearly identical to the main models of this study (see Models A.3 through A.5 of Table A.6 of the appendix).

¹⁶The usage of year dummy variables is preferable to the usage of specific variables controlling for exogenous shocks as it does not require the authors to identify events that may or may not have an effect on party platforms, a

Similarly, we include dummy variables for the policy area using macroeconomic policy as the baseline.

As our dependent variable is continuous, ordinary least squares regression (OLS) is most appropriate. Due to the time-series cross-sectional nature of the data, however, it is possible that the dependent variable at time t_1 influences the dependent variable at time t_0 . That is, the platform statements of parties in one election are likely correlated with the statements of that same party in the previous election platform. Thus, we must consider including a lagged version of the dependent variable in the analysis. However, as the use of OLS regression with a lagged dependent variable may lead to issues with autocorrelation ([Plümper et al., 2005](#)), we rely upon a Prais-Winsten transformation technique for OLS. This procedure has been used commonly in political party research in the European context (see [Spoon et al., 2014](#); [Williams and Spoon, 2015](#); [Spoon and Williams, 2017](#); [Williams and Ishiyama, 2018](#)). Furthermore, we use panel-corrected standard errors.

3. Results

Below, the results for tests of the above hypothesis are presented. Model 1 is a direct test of the effect of public opinion regarding the most important problem in the United States in a year on the percentage of a party platform dedicated to that specific policy area in the next year. This model pools both the Republican and Democratic parties together. As higher values of the dependent variable indicate more statements regarding a policy area in platforms, a positive coefficient indicates that a variable is associated with greater statements regarding a particular policy area.

As can be seen in Model 1 (see [Table 1](#)), the effect of public opinion regarding the most important problem on party platform statements concerning that policy area is positive and statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.01$ level. This indicates that when a larger percentage of the public believes a particular policy area is the most important problem facing the United States at time t_1 , the political parties increase the frequency with which they discuss that policy area at time t_0 . This finding supports the above hypothesis.

Importantly, the squared version of the main independent variable is statistically significant with a coefficient of -0.003 . This suggests that the relationship between the percentage of the public viewing a policy area as the most important problem, and party attention to that policy area in a platform is curvilinear. That is, as the percentage of the population viewing a particular policy area as the most important increases, the effect on party platforms will decrease.

To examine this relationship more closely, the marginal effects of the main independent variable, while holding all other variables at their means, were calculated. [Fig. 1](#) plots these marginal effects with the percentage of the public viewing a particular policy area as the most important problem on the x-axis, and the percentage of the party platform dedicated to that policy area on the y-axis. The solid black line represents the expected effect of public opinion on party platforms, and the dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval.

As can be seen, when no members of the public view a policy area as the most important problem, about 4.26% of a party's platform will be dedicated to that area. However, when 10% of the public view a policy area as the most important problem, about 6.09% of a party's platform will be dedicated to that particular policy area. When 30% of the population views a policy area as the most important problem, parties are expected to dedicate 7.95% of their platforms to that issue. Further, if 50% of the population views a policy area as the most important problem, it is expected that parties will dedicate about 7.50% of their

(footnote continued)

strategy that could lead to omitted variable bias. Rather, the year dummy variables account for all events that may influence party platforms.

platform to that policy area.

Importantly, although it appears that the marginal effect of the percentage of the public believing a particular issue area to be the most important problem diminishes when this variable reaches extreme high levels, it should be noted that the 95% confidence interval is quite large, and one cannot say with confidence that the effect does, in fact, decrease. Rather, it is distinctly possible that the effect of the percentage of the public viewing an issue as the most important problem remains flat (or even increases) at these extreme values of the variable.

It should be noted that the above tests present results across a pooled sample of both the Republican and Democratic parties. However, it is possible that the Republican Party responds differently to public opinion than does the Democratic Party. To address this possibility, Model 2 (see Table 1), presents the results of a test in which the dataset is restricted to only the Republican Party.¹⁷

As can be seen, after restricting the sample to only the Republican Party, the main independent variable remains statistically significant and in the expected direction, showing a coefficient of 0.188. Further, the squared term of the main independent variable is also statistically significant and negative, indicating that the effect is curvilinear.

Model 3 (see Table 1) tests the effect of the percentage of the public viewing a particular policy area as the most important on the percentage of the Democratic Party platform dedicated to that policy area. Similar to Model 2 for the Republican Party, this is done by restricting the dataset to only the Democratic Party. The effect for the main independent variable in Model 3 closely resembles the findings in Models 1 and 2, in that it is statistically significant and positive. The coefficient in Model 3, however, is slightly larger than in Models 1 or 2, at 0.226. Further, the squared term of the main independent variable is also statistically significant and negative, indicating that the effect is curvilinear.

The findings in Models 2 and 3 suggest that the Democratic Party may be more responsive to public attitudes regarding which policy areas are the most important problems, as the coefficient in Model 3 is slightly larger than the coefficient in Model 2. To more closely examine the difference in these effects, the marginal effects of the main independent variable for both models were calculated. In Fig. 2, the marginal effects of the percentage of the public viewing a particular policy area as the most important problem on the percentage of the Republican and Democratic platforms dedicated to that policy area are graphed, respectively.

On the x-axis is the percentage of the public believing an issue area is the most important problem. The y-axis is the percentage of each parties' platform that is dedicated to a policy area. The red line with long dashes and 3 dots is the expected effect for the Republican sample, and the blue line with short dashes and 2 dots is the expected effect for the Democratic sample. The long dashed red lines are the 95% confidence interval for the Republican sample, while the short dashed blue lines are the 95% confidence interval for the Democratic sample.

The expected effect for the Democratic Party is greater than the expected effect for the Republican Party throughout most of the sample, save for situations in which only a small percentage of the public believes an issue area to be the most important problem. However, the 95% confidence interval of the Democratic Party effect overlaps substantially with the 95% confidence interval of the Republican Party effect at all points along the x-axis. Thus, the effects presented in Fig. 2

¹⁷ For ease of interpretation, we chose to split the sample by party rather than interacting the main independent variable (and its squared term) with a dummy variable for the Republican Party. As a robustness check, we did run a model (see Model A.6 in Table A.7 of the appendix) in which our main independent variable and the squared version of our main independent variable were interacted with a dummy variable for the Republican Party. The results suggest the Republican Party is no more or less responsive to public opinion regarding the most important problem facing the country than is the Democratic Party. This is in line with the findings of Models 2 and 3 and Fig. 2 of this study.

Table 1
Effect of public opinion on platform statements.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Main Independent Variables			
% Identifying Area as MIP _{t-1}	0.213 (0.048)***	0.188 (0.059)***	0.226 (0.063)***
% Identifying Area as MIP _{t-1} ²	-0.003 (0.001)***	-0.003 (0.001)***	-0.003 (0.001)***
Control Variables			
Republican Dummy	0.118 (0.105)	.	.
Opposition Statements on Area _{t-1}	0.075 (0.046)*	0.104 (0.065)	0.121 (0.064)*
Civil Rights Policy	-0.634 (0.634)	0.025 (0.720)	-0.904 (0.988)
Health Policy	-0.987 (1.068)	-0.416 (1.866)	-0.912 (1.195)
Agriculture Policy	-1.669 (0.744)**	-1.020 (1.147)	-2.126 (1.165)*
Labor/Employment Policy	-1.140 (0.947)	-1.933 (1.378)	-0.777 (1.194)
Education Policy	-1.342 (0.843)	-1.095 (0.951)	-0.571 (1.546)
Environment Policy	-2.534 (0.885)***	-2.581 (1.017)**	-1.958 (1.157)*
Education Policy	-2.699 (0.945)***	-2.416 (0.932)***	-2.386 (1.163)**
Immigration Policy	-3.939 (0.922)***	-3.658 (1.021)***	-3.595 (1.209)***
Transportation Policy	-3.391 (0.765)***	-2.936 (1.091)***	-3.195 (1.116)***
Law and Crime Policy	-1.033 (1.339)	-0.342 (1.204)	-1.149 (1.786)
Social Welfare Policy	-1.590 (0.780)**	-2.331 (1.203)*	-1.365 (1.027)
Housing Policy	-2.479 (0.860)***	-2.417 (1.137)**	-0.958 (1.322)
Domestic Commerce Policy	-2.761 (0.860)***	-2.666 (1.030)***	-1.925 (1.131)*
Defense Policy	2.435 (0.992)**	3.817 (0.870)***	0.949 (1.499)
Technology Policy	-3.599 (0.935)***	-3.155 (1.122)***	-3.189 (1.222)***
Foreign Trade Policy	-2.906 (0.806)***	-2.487 (1.133)**	-2.648 (1.095)**
International Affairs Policy	8.444 (1.043)***	9.147 (1.346)***	6.997 (1.126)***
Government Operations Policy	-0.539 (0.921)	0.187 (1.006)	-1.023 (1.185)
Public Lands Policy	-1.325 (0.990)	-1.005 (1.261)	-1.093 (1.311)
1956	-0.600 (0.184)***	-0.423 (0.224)*	-0.894 (0.282)***
1960	-0.331 (0.195)*	-0.455 (0.277)*	-0.242 (0.267)
1964	-0.616 (0.206)***	-0.879 (0.281)***	-0.405 (0.280)
1968	-0.548 (0.220)**	-0.589 (0.266)**	-0.529 (0.317)*
1972	-0.472 (0.235)**	-0.723 (0.288)**	-0.281 (0.322)
1976	-0.218 (0.199)	-0.291 (0.256)	-0.226 (0.274)
1980	0.262 (0.199)	0.248 (0.260)	0.167 (0.271)
1984	-0.064 (0.193)	-0.204 (0.252)	-0.101 (0.269)
1988	-0.177 (0.222)	-0.489 (0.274)*	-0.018 (0.298)
1992	-0.830 (0.221)***	-0.705 (0.265)***	-1.183 (0.313)***
1996	-0.655 (0.221)***	-1.002 (0.273)***	-0.449 (0.311)
2000	-0.579 (0.221)***	-0.534 (0.270)**	-0.739 (0.313)**

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
2004	-0.604 (0.219)***	-0.703 (0.275)**	-0.650 (0.305)**
2008	-0.459 (0.233)**	-0.537 (0.287)*	-0.537 (0.325)*
2012	-0.408 (0.186)**	-0.538 (0.239)**	-0.401 (0.263)
Constant	5.362 (0.859)***	5.070 (1.098)***	5.028 (1.127)***
R ²	0.801	0.853	0.772
N	617	309	308
Clusters	40	20	20

Note: Table entries are OLS regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors and we have adjusted for panel-specific autoregressive(1)s. The dependent variable in Model 1 is the percentage of a party's platform dedicated to a particular policy area. Model 2 restricts the data to only the Republican Party, whereas Model 3 restricts the data to only the Democratic Party.
* $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.01$.

do not suggest strongly that major differences between the parties in responsiveness to the public viewing a particular policy area as the most important problem exist.

Regarding control variables, the percentage of the opposition party's platform dedicated to a specific policy area is significant in Models 1 and 3, while it approaches significance in Model 2. This suggests that the parties do use their platforms to address the issue areas that the opposing party discussed to a greater degree in the last election.

Regarding the issue area dummy variables, the issue areas of environmental policy, energy policy, immigration policy, transportation policy, domestic commerce policy, technology policy, and foreign trade policy are all statistically significant and negative in all models. This indicates that both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party tend to discuss these issue areas to a smaller degree than they do macroeconomic policy. Conversely, international affairs policy is statistically significant and positive in all models, indicating that both the Republicans and Democrats tend to discuss this policy area more than macroeconomic policy.

Further, the issue areas of social welfare policy, and housing policy were statistically significant and negative, while defense policy was statistically significant and positive in Models 1 and 2. These dummy variables were statistically insignificant in Model 3. These findings

indicate that the Republican Party tends to discuss social welfare policy, and housing policy to a lesser degree than macroeconomic policy, but they discuss defense policy to a greater degree than macroeconomic policy. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party does not appear to address any of these issue areas to a greater or lesser degree than macroeconomic policy.

Finally, the dummy variable for agricultural policy is statistically significant and negative in Models 1 and 3, while it is insignificant in Model 2. This indicates that the Democrats discuss agricultural policy to a lesser degree than they do macroeconomic policy, while the Republicans tend to discuss agricultural policy to the same degree as macroeconomic policy.

4. Conclusion

This study has sought to build a deeper understanding of political party responsiveness in the United States. Specifically, it attempted to determine whether parties in the US respond to public opinion when taking official platform positions. It was theorized that political parties, in an attempt to “ride the wave” of public opinion, address issues that the public deems more important in the party's official platforms.

The results of this study find support for the “riding the wave” perspective in the United States. In particular, it was found that when a larger percentage of the public at time t_1 views a particular issue area as the most important problem facing the country, the parties tend to dedicate a larger percentage of their platforms to these issues at time t_0 . Importantly, this effect was found to be roughly the same for both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

These findings have important implications for understanding political party behavior in the United States, as well as for assessing the democratic health of the US. Regarding political party behavior, these findings suggest that political parties do not simply respond to the public in their advertisements, press releases, or leaders' speeches, but rather, parties take into account public opinion when they craft their official platform positions. As research has shown that these official platforms do, in fact, influence policy agendas, and policy decisions of political parties in the United States once they enter into office (see Royed, 1996; Royed and Borrelli, 1997), the above finding suggests that the policies addressed by political parties are driven, at least partly, by public opinions, attitudes, and preferences.

In terms of the democratic health of the United States, these findings are normatively encouraging. Democracy is predicated on the idea that

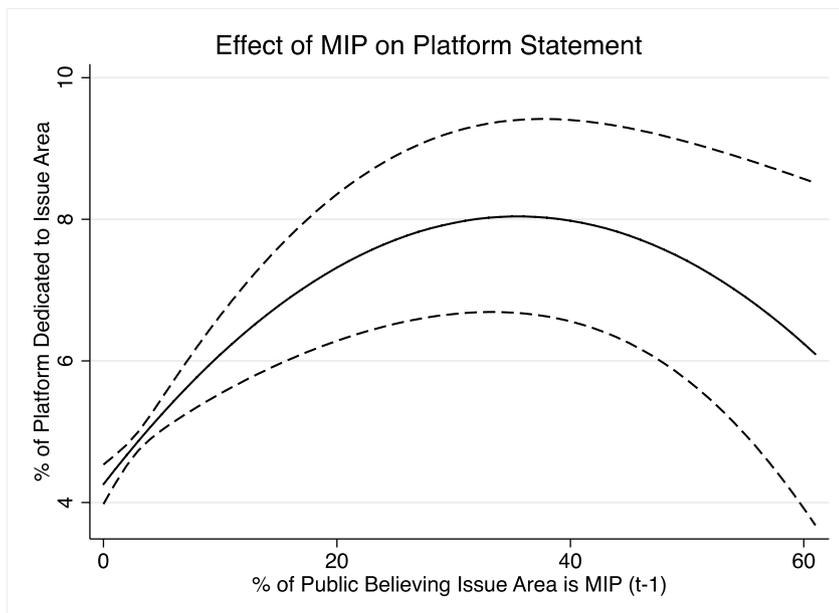


Fig. 1. Marginal effects of public opinion on platform statements.

Note: This figure is based on Model 1. It shows the marginal effect of the percentage of the public believing a particular policy area to be the most important problem on the percentage of statements in party platforms dedicated to that policy area. This figure uses data for both the Republican and Democratic parties pooled. The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval.

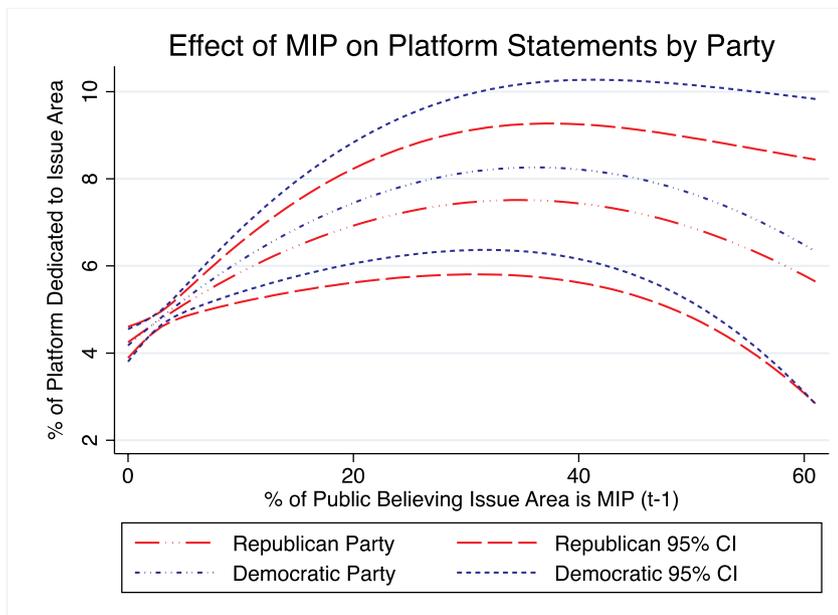


Fig. 2. Marginal effects of public opinion on platform statements by party.

Note: This figure is based on Models 2 and 3. It shows the marginal effect of the percentage of the public believing a particular policy area to be the most important problem on the percentage of statements in the platforms of both the Republican and Democratic parties dedicated to that policy area. The red line with long dashes and three dots represents the expected effect for the Republican Party, while the blue line with short dashes and two dots represents the expected effect for the Democratic Party. The long dashed red lines represent the 95% confidence interval for the Republican Party, and the short dashed blue lines represent the 95% confidence interval for the Democratic Party.

public policies are related to the wishes of the citizens (Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1971; Powell, 2000). The above findings suggest that political parties do listen to the public. As political parties act as policymakers once elected, these findings indicate that those issues that the public is most concerned about are being addressed by policymakers. This suggests that public sentiment is influencing policy activity in some regard.

Moreover, this study suggests that party responsiveness is not limited to a single party, but rather both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party appear to be responsive to the concerns of the citizenry. As party competition is an important aspect of democratic governance, this shows some evidence of a healthy working American democracy.

Importantly, this study is one step in understanding the relationship between official party positions and public attitudes. The above findings only indicate that when the public views a particular policy area as the most important problem, political parties tend to talk about those same issues in their subsequent platforms. One avenue for future research is to examine the role of a party's issue ownership (see Walgrave et al., 2012 for a discussion of issue ownership) in its decision to respond to public attitudes in writing platforms. It may well be that one party is more likely to increase its discussion of a certain issue that the public finds particularly salient when the public also views that party as the owner of that issue, whereas, the other party will attempt to decrease discussion of that issue so as not to further increase the salience of that issue to the public. A second route for future research is to examine the content of the statements made by the parties in relation to the policies the public prefers.¹⁸ That is, for example, if the public prefers more spending in the area of education policy, do the political parties mirror this public preference in their official platforms?

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¹⁸ Unfortunately, at current time, it is impossible to test whether the statements made by parties in platforms conform to the policy preferences of the public as we do not have a long enough time-series in the US measuring the direction of the public's policy preferences. The most important problem question, moreover, cannot be used interchangeably with a directional preferences question (see Jennings and Wlezien, 2015).

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