Elections: Voter Support and Partisans’ (Mis)Perceptions of Presidential Candidates’ Abortion Views in 2000

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Although the 2000 Republican and Democratic national party platforms show the parties at opposite poles on abortion policy, Governor George W. Bush publicly supported a vaguely defined “culture of life,” rather than the constitutional amendment barring abortion that was advocated by his party. In light of Bush’s campaign strategy, this article uses national survey data to examine the accuracy of citizens’ knowledge of the candidates’ abortion policy positions. Interestingly, pro-choice Republican voters were much less likely to defect from their party in 2000 than in 1996, suggesting that the Bush campaign’s efforts to avoid public opposition to his abortion position were successful.

In August of 2000, a self-avowed fundamentalist Christian who had publicly pledged to “do everything in my power to restrict abortion” earned the Republican Presidential nomination in Philadelphia. In an apparent attempt to diffuse this controversial issue, throughout the nomination and presidential campaign Governor George W. Bush obscured his abortion views and avoided discussing the topic. His official position is that abortion should be outlawed except in cases of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother.

1. Quoted in the October 22, 1994 Dallas Morning News.
In a debate with Senator John McCain on Larry King Live, Governor Bush simultaneously maintained that he completely endorsed and agreed with the Republican Party platform (which calls for a constitutional amendment barring all abortions) and he supported the above-noted exceptions. Senator McCain apparently found it so frustrating to attempt to force Governor Bush to clarify these mutually exclusive positions that he eventually quit discussing abortion (Larry King Live 2000).

The Bush campaign’s efforts to obscure the candidate’s abortion position reached their height during the first presidential debate when Bush refused to verify his previously stated plan to try to overturn the FDA’s approval of the RU-486 abortion drug, saying he was only interested in doing whatever would protect women’s health. He then linked his position on abortion to promoting a “culture of life,” saying that while “abortions ought to be more rare in America,” this culture would also lead to fighting laws that “allow doctors to take the lives of our seniors” and change the culture to discourage “youngsters who feel like they can take a neighbor’s life with a gun” (Commission on Presidential Debates 2000). It would be difficult to find anyone who actively favors more abortions and more killing of older people and neighbors by teenagers. In the same debate, Vice President Al Gore clearly stated his support for a woman’s right to choose abortion and RU-486, although he said he did not favor late-term or partial birth abortions (Commission on Presidential Debates 2000).

During the campaign, disguising the Republican Party’s long-standing strong opposition to legal abortions could have advantaged Bush in several ways. First, only a small minority of Americans shares the Republican Party’s official position—only 17 percent in the most recent Gallup poll (Gallup Organization and USA Today 2003). Publicly supporting an unpopular policy is not likely to increase one’s broad-based general election support. Second, even within the Republican Party, the abortion issue has generated tremendous conflict. The last several conventions have been characterized by a certain amount of rancor over abortion, although these disagreements are most visible when the platform is written before the convention. Third, Bush’s campaign may have been trying to avoid having an abortion controversy attach itself to the candidate and increase the attention paid to this issue by voters.

It seems reasonably clear that Bush attempted to obscure his abortion position to broaden his appeal to pro-choice voters, but on an issue as salient as abortion, how effective was this strategy? Was it, in fact, any more effective at preventing defection of pro-choice Republicans than Gore’s clear statement of his abortion position was effective at preventing defection of pro-life Democrats? Because there are a roughly equal number of pro-life Democrats and pro-choice Republicans (Greene and Brians 2001), the most effective test may be to determine how many of each party’s adherents defected in presidential voting. This comparison is facilitated by the fact that there are only small differences in the issue importance between those in the minority in either party—that is, pro-life Democrats or pro-choice Republicans (Greene and Brians 2001).

2. Although Al Gore’s issue positions were closer to more voters, the vice president often seemed unable to communicate his shared ideas with voters during this campaign, leading to a widespread lack of accurate issue knowledge about the candidates in 2000 (Waldman and Jamieson 2003).
Those holding minority abortion policy views in a given political party may not defect and vote for the candidate closer to their view because the voters may not see the issue as that important, they may choose to ignore their party’s and candidate’s views on the issue, or they may not realize they do not hold the dominant view in the party. While candidates’ actions and statements may facilitate each of these possibilities by making their issue position less obvious, voters who attribute their own position to their favored candidate—or at least “move” their favored candidate’s attitudes closer to their own position—find it easier to vote for that candidate (Wilson and Gronke 2000; Krosnick 1990; Martinez 1988). The tendency of some voters to project policy positions onto candidates to rationalize their vote choice was empirically identified in the 1948 Presidential election (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 219-23), the 1968 election (Brody and Page 1972; Page and Brody 1972), and the 1980 election (Wattenberg 1991, 111-16).3

Quantitatively testing an apparent campaign strategy, such as the obfuscation of an abortion policy position, poses serious challenges, because one cannot know what other outcomes might have occurred in the absence of the strategy. On the one hand, Governor Bush would seem to be successful if he did not do worse than Vice President Gore at preventing defections by abortion opinion minorities in his party through projection. On the other hand, an identical outcome could suggest that Gore was more successful, because he achieved no worse defections without obfuscating his abortion position. Alternatively, if abortion has been a more contentious issue for Republicans, Bush simply holding his defections equal to Gore’s may connote success. Ultimately, it is not possible to know for certain what voters would have done if Bush had more clearly stated his abortion stance. Still, it would be instructive to compare the 2000 election data to 1996, when the Democratic nominee held Gore’s position, but the Republican presidential nominee had been identified as open to a pro-choice position. This was particularly highlighted when Senator Bob Dole chose pro-choice New York Representative Susan Molinari to be the 1996 Republican National Convention keynote speaker, and proposed including language that tolerated alternative points of view on abortion in the party platform. Thus, to gain perspective, at several points in the analysis, 2000 data will be compared and contrasted with the 1996 results.

Data

We primarily use data from the 2000 National Election Studies (NES), as well as the 1996 NES, in order to assess the role that abortion played in the 2000 campaign. Our analyses rely principally on several key variables: respondent’s position on abortion, respondent’s placement of the presidential candidates on abortion, respondent’s partisanship, and respondent’s two-party vote choice. The analyses are conducted by placing respondents into four groups based upon their partisanship and abortion position: pro-choice Democrats, pro-life Democrats, pro-choice Republicans, and pro-life Republicans.

3. While Reagan benefited from rationalizations that citizens used to vote against Carter in 1980, voters seemed more comfortable acknowledging their policy differences with Reagan in 1984 while still supporting him at the polls (Wattenberg 1991, 116).
The standard NES abortion question ranges from 1 to 4, with 1 being “abortion should never be permitted,” 2 stating that “abortion should be permitted in case of rape, incest, and threat to mother’s life,” 3 indicating that “only after the need for the abortion has clearly been established,” and 4 holding that “by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.” Respondents place themselves, as well as each candidate, on this scale. In order to categorize our respondents, we place those who indicated that their own position was 1 or 2 as pro-life and those indicating 4 as pro-choice. Unfortunately, the “clear need” category proves so problematic that we choose not to group respondents based upon this belief. As for the partisanship basis of our group categorizations, because we are interested in how the supporters of each party stand on abortion, leaners may reasonably be grouped with self-identified party supporters (Greene 2000). We use these four categories to analyze respondent vote choice and respondent placement of candidates’ abortion position in both 1996 and 2000.

Data Analysis

Our analyses examine general voting patterns depending upon abortion attitudes and partisanship and evaluate more specific tests of the possibility that voters projected their own attitudes onto candidates. Although our main focus is the 2000 election, we include 1996 data as well, to provide a relative baseline for the 2000 candidates’ performance. The primary goal of these analyses is to determine which candidate benefited most from their campaign’s approach to abortion policy: whether it was Gore’s more plainly stated position, or Bush’s less clear abortion position. The secondary and related goal is to assess the relative impact of projection for the candidacies of Bush and Gore.

The initial examination of projection on the abortion issue indicates similar levels of misperception about both candidates by both Republicans and Democrats, regardless of abortion attitude. In Figure 1, we see that as Democrats become more liberal on abortion, the distance they see between Bush and Gore on the issue increases dramatically. Likewise, as Republicans become more conservative on abortion, the distance between Gore and Bush increases in a similarly pronounced fashion. In general, as respondents move in the direction of their party’s core position, they are not only more in line with their party’s candidate on the abortion issue but are more distant from the opposition party candidate as well. These figures thus further demonstrate the potentially important role for projection of abortion positions to play in voter decision making.

Comparing the two-party vote with partisans’ abortion stances, it is apparent that Bush held the Republican Party together much better in 2000 than did Dole in 1996. Table 1 presents the percentage of voters in each of our four categories (pro-life Democrat, pro-choice Democrat, pro-life Republican, pro-choice Republican) who voted for

4. When exploring how people with this attitude characterize “supporters of abortion” and “opponents of abortion” on the 1990 NES feeling thermometer measures, the mean values are close—45 and 55, respectively (on a 0 to 100 scale)—and the distribution of scores has large numbers at the extreme ends of both measures. This group seems to contain persons holding a range of moderate and situational abortion views, making it impossible to accurately place them into either a pro-life or pro-choice category.
Note: The x-axis represents respondents’ positions on when abortion should be legal, and the y-axis tracks respondents’ perceptions of each candidate’s abortion view. On the x-axis, never means “by law, abortion should never be permitted,” threat indicates that “the law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman’s life is in danger,” clear need means that “abortion should be permitted only after the need for the abortion has clearly been established,” and always indicates that “by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.”
each of the major party candidates in 1996 and 2000. This cross-tabulation of the two-party vote by a four-level combined measure of abortion stance and partisanship demonstrates that the GOP lost substantially more pro-choice Republican votes (29 versus 18 percent) in 1996 as opposed to 2000, and even saw 8 percent of the pro-life Republicans defect in 1996. On the other hand, even though Gore held onto pro-choice Democratic votes at a rate almost equal to Clinton (93 versus 95 percent), he lost 15 percent of pro-life Democrats, in contrast to only 8 percent for Clinton. Thus, even though the Democratic Party appeared to have an absolute advantage on the abortion issue in 2000, its position was weakened relative to 1996.

Given the political salience and personal importance attached to the abortion issue, one might ask why there are not more defections in vote choice, especially among pro-life Democrats. Tables 2A and 2B present analyses demonstrating the high levels of projection taking place on the abortion issue. The projection on abortion is most evident in the pro-life Democrats’ ratings of Gore and Clinton and pro-choice Republicans’ ratings of Bush and Dole. One can clearly see that these groups are, in fact, dramatic outliers. Pro-life Democrats place Gore at 2.76, when objectively, his true position would have to be close to 4. Likewise, pro-choice Republicans place Bush at 2.70, when his actual position could objectively not be considered more than 2—which is almost exactly where the other groups placed him. The results follow a very similar pattern in 1996. The notable difference is that Bush is seen as more pro-choice, 2.70, by pro-choice Republicans, than is Dole, 2.46, who was actually the more liberal of the two on abortion. At least relative to Dole, Bush’s strategy on abortion was clearly more effective.

Additionally, Tables 2A and 2B provide strong evidence as to why the Democratic candidates are more effective at holding their party’s minority abortion position voters. In both 1996 and 2000, pro-life Democrats saw themselves as 1.12 away from the Democratic candidate. In contrast, Bush was seen as 1.43 away from pro-choice Republicans. In sum, the results in Tables 2A and 2B suggest that Democratic candidates benefit from projection on the abortion issue more than Republicans. Crucially, in

### TABLE 1
Vote Percent by Partisanship and Abortion Attitude in 1996 and 2000

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<th>1996</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Dole</td>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Gore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-choice Democrats</td>
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<td>95</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-life Democrats</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-life Republicans</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>4</td>
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Note: The numbers in parentheses are cell frequencies.
2000’s razor-thin outcome, Bush was much more successful in keeping pro-choice Republicans loyal, clearly in part from a campaign that allowed very substantial projection of their own abortion issue position onto him.  

**Conclusion**

This study indicates that campaigns may be able to influence voters' level of misinformation about candidates’ issue positions. These preliminary results suggest that Governor Bush was more successful in obscuring his, and his party’s, abortion policy position among voters in 2000, than was Senator Dole in 1996. Vice President Gore’s more straightforward approach may have cost him some support, when compared to President Bill Clinton in 1996.

The salience of abortion will most likely only increase in upcoming elections. With recent controversies over “partial-birth” abortion and anticipation already building over

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5. In an analysis not reported here, we found that abortion is not the only issue where Governor Bush benefited from voter projection in 2000. More voters projected their government spending views onto Bush in 2000 than had done the same with Dole in 1996.
what are likely to be among the most contentious Supreme Court appointments ever made—largely due to concerns over the continued legality of abortion—the ability of presidential candidates to strategically campaign on the abortion issue and take advantage of voter’s predictions toward projection will become even more important. The Democrats seem to have an advantage on the issue, for the time being, but Bush’s 2000 performance suggests that this advantage can be dramatically diminished.

Some may be concerned by this article’s findings and the potential for future manipulation of public opinion by campaigns. Clearly, the degree to which candidates will be able to increase voters’ misperceptions of their issue stances in the 2004 presidential election largely depends upon the news media’s attention to the campaign. The substantially greater care most campaigns have used in preparing and documenting their advertising following the intense press attention to ads in the 1988 campaign demonstrates that candidates can regulate their own behavior when they know that the watchdogs are on duty. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that if the press closely watches the candidates in 2004, the projection seen among voters in 2000 is less likely to be repeated.

References


