

## CHAPTER II

This chapter codes recent Democratic and Republican party platforms on the basis of two policy issues – abortion and taxation – and conducts a series of regressions to determine the reasons for the parties’ support or opposition. The potential explanations considered are issue saliency, public opinion, and an interaction term between the two.

Results from a basic multivariate regression indicate that Democrats may prefer to focus platform attention upon the abortion issue and Republicans prefer to focus upon the taxation issue, believing that their stances on these issues are broadly in line with public sentiment; likewise, Democrats may shy away from the taxation issue if they believe their stance is unpopular. Also, Republicans may adopt more flexible platform positions on taxation than on abortion.

Results from a panel study indicate that the parties are likely to support issues that are both salient and popular, but are less likely to support issues that share only one of those attributes. Both parties significantly reduce their support for taxation when it becomes a relevant issue.

## I. Introduction

Why do political parties adopt the positions that they do? Answers to this question have remained elusive, in part due to difficulties in simply quantifying party positioning. Public support for a given issue, as well as that issue's prominence in the public arena, clearly both go a long way towards explaining party positioning – but the precise nature of this relationship has been difficult to establish. This chapter makes an attempt.

Traditional measures of party positioning have centered around Congressional roll-call data, on the theory that actions speak louder than words. Yet a party's words should not be wholly disregarded; there is value in centralized statements of a party's core beliefs. In the United States these statements take the form of national party platforms, released every four years to coincide with presidential elections.

This chapter measures party positioning by coding these platforms since 1972 on the basis of two issues: abortion rights and taxation. Each is a contentious issue that has featured prominently in the vast majority of recent party platforms. Moreover, between them they represent both social and fiscal issues, to account for any possible difference in public treatment of the two (Frank 2004).

## II. Literature Review

No prior studies have involved coding U.S. party platforms.<sup>1</sup> Work in this field has concentrated upon coding European party manifestos along a variety of policy dimensions (Marks et al. 2006). This work has gradually yielded a number of studies

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<sup>1</sup> Gerring (1998) and Ginsberg and Shefter (1999) examine U.S. party positioning over the last three decades, but do not take coded party platforms into account.

laying out coding methodologies, principally word counts and expert surveys (Gabel and Huber 2000, Budge 2001, Budge et al. 2001, Laver 2001, Ray 2001, Pennings and Keman 2002, Laver and Garry 2003).

Many prior works have documented changes in public opinion with respect to abortion and taxation (Carmines and Stimson 1990, Page and Shapiro 1992, Stimson 1998, Alexander 2004, Stimson 2004).

On abortion, the consensus seems to be that support rose steadily until the early 1970s, at which point it declined somewhat before leveling off (Page and Shapiro, 104-110). Abortion preferences are considered “unusual” in that “[c]ompared to all others their variation is small (Stimson 1998, 89).

On taxation, there is a consensus that support declined throughout the 1970s, then rose during the 1980s upon the enactment of substantial tax cuts (Page and Shapiro, 160-166). Taxation data are likewise considered to be among the more stable, low-variance public opinion time series.

Several studies have considered the question of issue saliency (Czudnowski 1968, Niemi and Bartels 1985, Bernstein 1995, Epstein and Segal 2000). These studies have largely focused on technical means of measuring issue salience, and have not confirmed nor disproved a linkage between saliency and public opinion.

### III. Data

U.S. party platforms are readily available through a variety of sources; those used for this chapter were downloaded from the UCSB American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters 2006).

Discarding the expert-survey method as potentially biased and in any case impractical, I adopted the recommendations of Gabel and Huber (2000) and Budge et al. (2001) while manually coding the platforms myself. The following methodology was designed to maximize reproducibility of my results.

For abortion, I conducted a search on the keywords “abortion”, “reproductive”, and “choice” – for every sentence in which one of these words appeared, I counted all the words in that sentence provided that the sentence indeed dealt with the topic of abortion. If a platform contained an entire section dedicated to abortion, I counted all the words in that section. I divided the abortion word count by the total number of words in the platform.<sup>2</sup>

For taxation, I simply sought out the section of each platform headlined “Taxes” (or a variation thereof) and counted every word in that section. I divided this figure by the total number of words in the platform.

I then qualitatively determined the party’s stance on the issue in question, and assigned a positive sign for support and a negative sign for opposition. In most cases, this process was straightforward – every Democratic platform supported abortion rights, and every Republican platform stood in opposition – with the exceptions of 1980 and 1996, when I considered the Democratic platforms to stake out a firm position in criticism of taxation.<sup>3</sup> In all other years the Democratic platform tended to support

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<sup>2</sup> The party-positioning literature further recommends that the coder take account of the position in the platform in which the text of interest appears, on the theory that a position higher up in the platform indicates that the party has given that issue more weight. It would be straightforward to count the number of words in the platform appearing prior to the section on abortion or taxation, and make positioning a negative function of that figure. I did not do so, however, upon determining that several platforms deliberately held back important issues until the very end. For example, the 2004 Republican platform concludes with an emotional appeal for a “culture of life”, including opposition to abortion rights.

<sup>3</sup> The 1992 and 2004 Democratic platforms also indicated support for tax cuts, though these proposed cuts would have been offset by much greater tax increases elsewhere.

taxation and oppose tax cuts. In all years the Republican platform strongly criticized taxation.

Finally, to avoid having data with negative values, I normalized each issue's lowest score at zero, by adding a small constant value to all data points. This indicates the lowest possible level of support for an issue, while higher values indicate a higher level of support.<sup>4</sup>

Results, for both Democratic and Republican platforms from 1972 to 2004, are given in Figure 1. A cursory examination indicates generally increasing Democratic support for abortion, and generally increasing Republican opposition; both parties appear to demonstrate declining support for taxation.

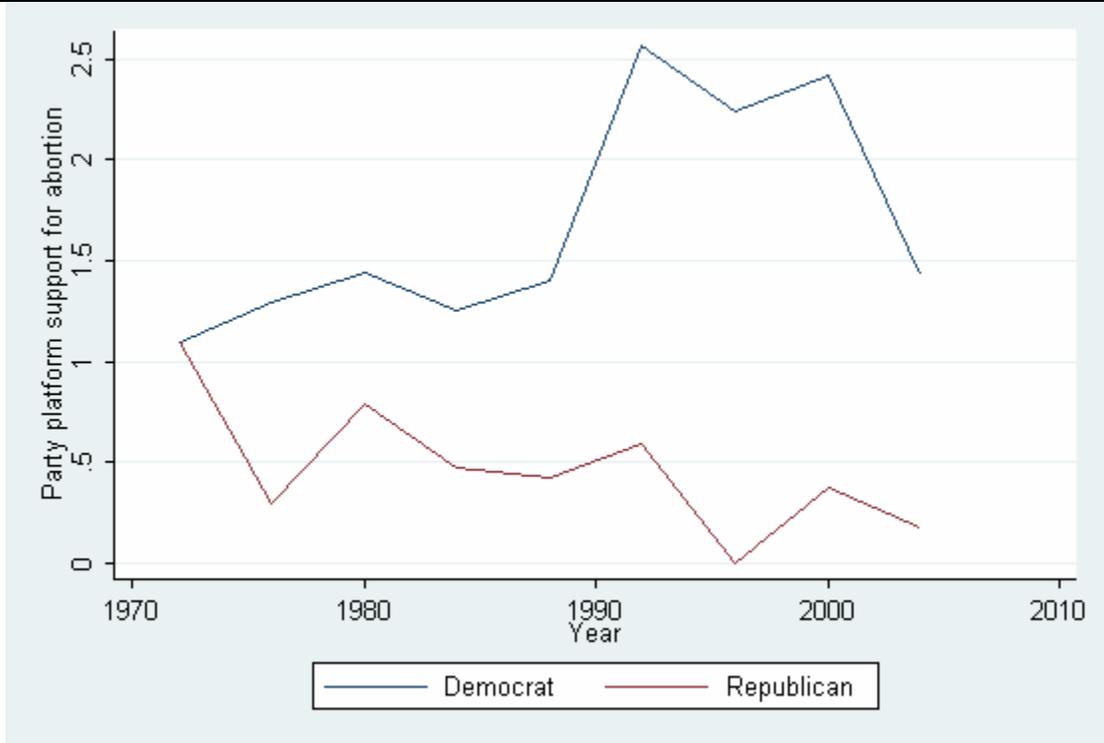
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Figure 1. Party platform support for abortion and taxation, 1972-2004

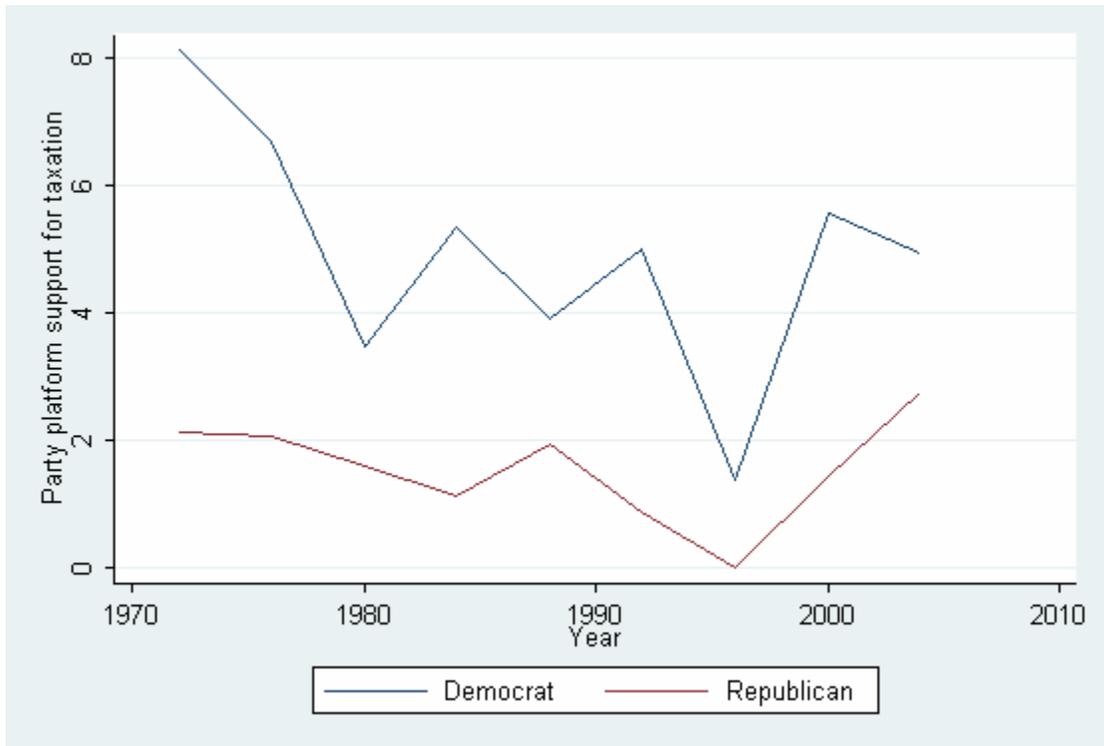
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<sup>4</sup> The primary weakness of these final party position scores are their uniform assumption that additional words on an issue translate into a stronger stance on that issue – in practice, additional words are often used to moderate or add nuance to a position. For example, the 1996 Democratic platform devoted a large section of text towards explaining that the party believed abortions should be rare.



(a) Abortion



(b) Taxation

Most public opinion data was taken directly from the General Social Survey combined 1972-2004 dataset (Davis et al. 2005). Unavailable in 1972 was the survey question asking respondents for their position on abortion rights “for any reason”, so I used the proportion of respondents who indicated support for abortion rights for pregnancies “as a result of rape”.

For taxation, the key GSS survey question (“Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?”) was likewise omitted in 1972. I consequently used a compilation of polls that asked very similar questions (Bowman 2004). Overall support for taxation was measured by taking the proportion of respondents believing their tax level was “about right” divided by the proportion deeming it “too high”. (“Too low” responses were negligible.)

Results are given in Figure 2. They appear generally consistent with the public opinion literature – support for abortion is stable, while support for taxation fell during the 1970s and rose during the 1980s.

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Figure 2. Public support for abortion and taxation, 1972-2004

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News coverage is widely accepted as a proxy for issue saliency (Mutz and Soss 1997). Therefore, to determine the saliency of the abortion and taxation issues in a given election year, I ran searches of the New York Times historical archive via the ProQuest database (*New York Times* 2006).<sup>5</sup> For abortion, I counted the number of articles containing the search term “abortion” in a given calendar year; for taxation, the search string was (“tax cut” OR “tax increase” OR “tax hike”). In each case the search was restricted to front-page news articles. In each case I took the logarithm of the number of article hits, to even out variations.

Results are given in Figure 3. There appears to be a gradual rise in the saliency of taxation, while abortion saliency appears to have peaked in the 1990s.

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Figure 3. Saliency of the abortion and taxation issues, 1972-2004

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<sup>5</sup> ProQuest data was unavailable for the year 2004; accordingly, I used 2003 as a substitute.



#### IV. Model Specification

This study's three variables are therefore party positioning (*position*), public opinion, (*opinion*), and issue saliency (*saliency*). Of these, *position* is the dependent variable, which a regression model will attempt to predict as a function of the independent variables *opinion* and *saliency* (Equation 1).

$$(1) \quad \hat{position} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 opinion + \beta_2 saliency$$

It may also be worth considering the interaction effects of public opinion and issue saliency. The mere fact that an issue is publicly prominent may not induce a party response in and of itself; rather, the determining factor could be prominence coupled with

public support. A third independent variable can therefore be generated that is the simple product of *opinion* and *saliency*, resulting in an alternative regression model (Equation 2).

$$(2) \quad \hat{position} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 opinion + \beta_2 saliency + \beta_3 (opinion * saliency)$$

Before proceeding, it is appropriate to determine the correlation between the independent variables – highly correlated independent variables would present a specification problem of multicollinearity. Correlation coefficients for both abortion and taxation are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation of public opinion with saliency

Issue	Correlation Coefficient
Abortion	.648
Taxation	.020

The correlation coefficients are .648 for abortion – a troubling figure – and a very low .020 for taxation, which is encouraging.

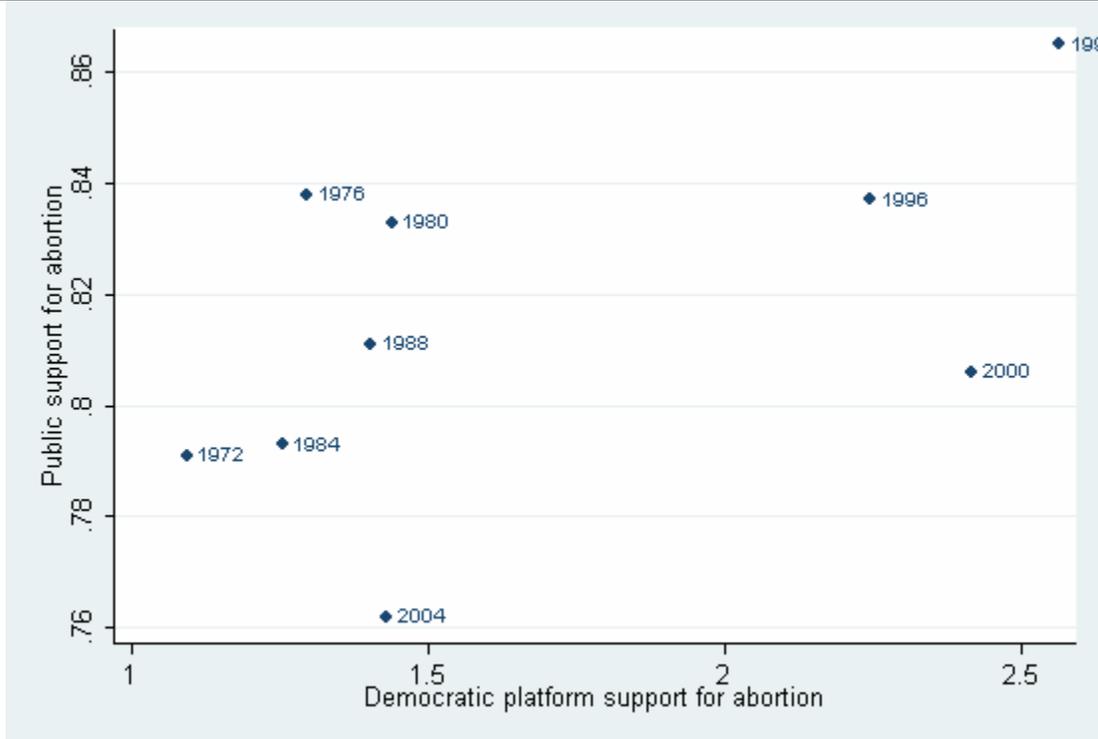
## V. Results

### A. Basic model

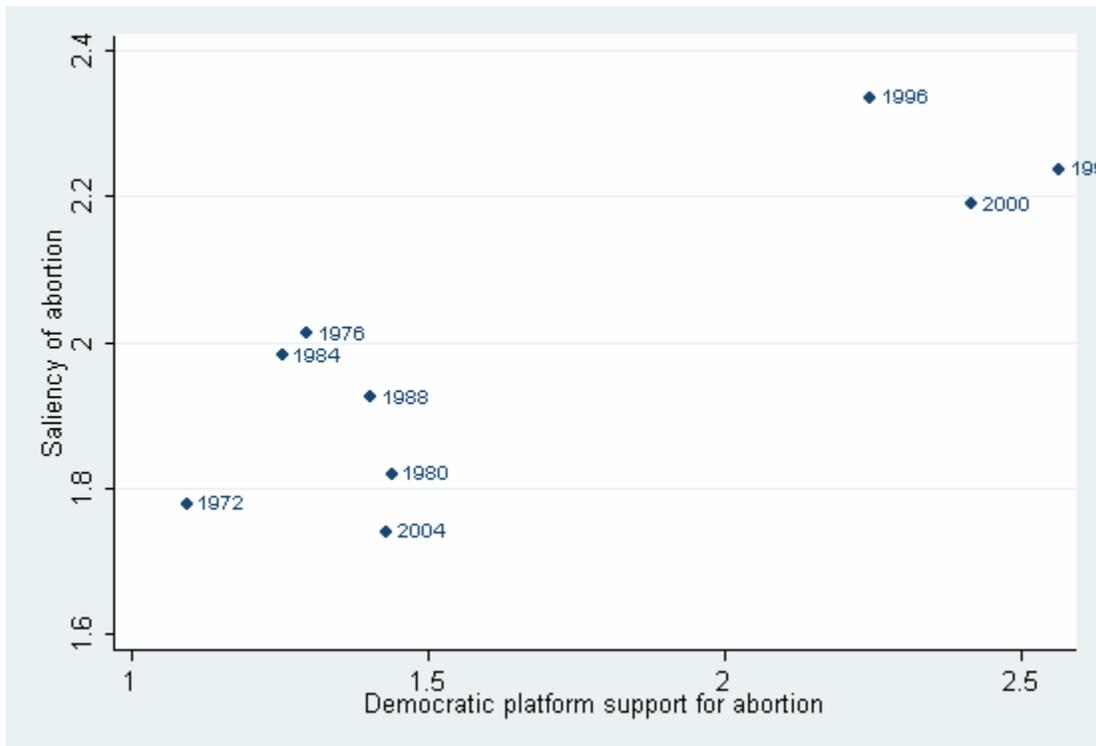
The next step is to conduct a series of bivariate and multivariate regressions. There will be four individual areas of analysis: Democratic positioning on abortion (Figure 4), Republican positioning on abortion (Figure 5), Democratic positioning on taxation (Figure 6), and Republican on taxation (Figure 7). In each case, the independent variables will remain identical; only the dependent variable will vary. Each area of

analysis will feature a multivariate regression consistent with equation (1), along with two subsequent bivariate regressions with each independent variable, for a grand total of 12 separate regressions.

Figure 4. Democratic abortion position vs. independent variables

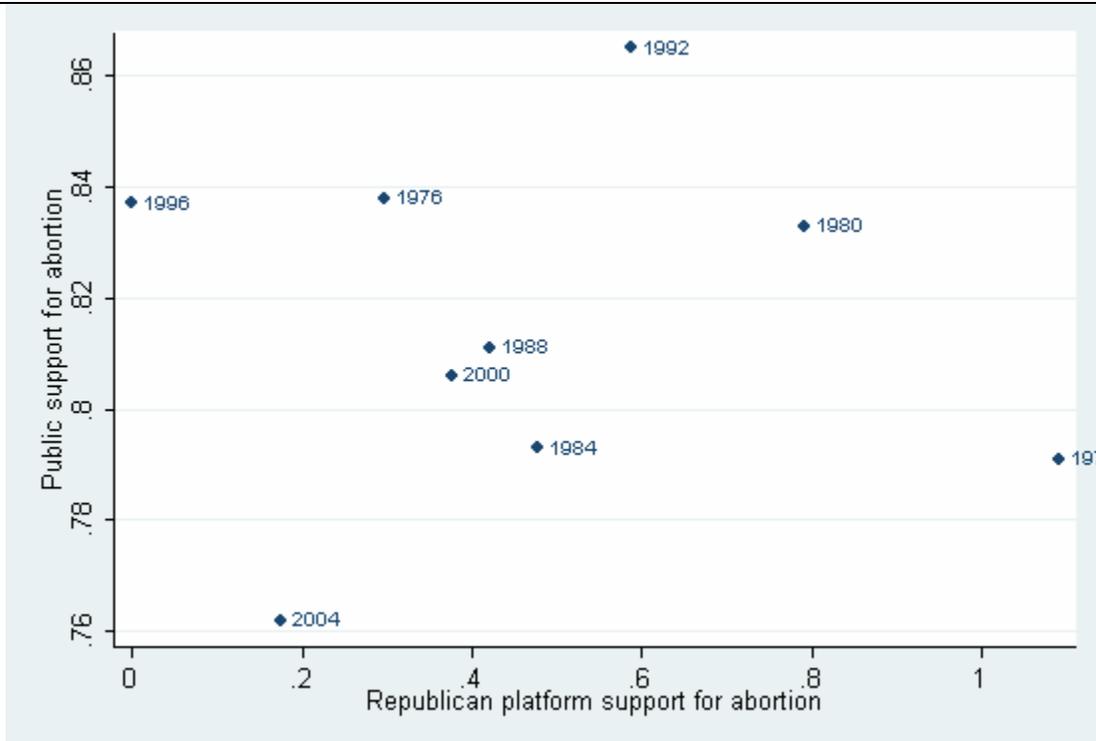


(a) Public opinion

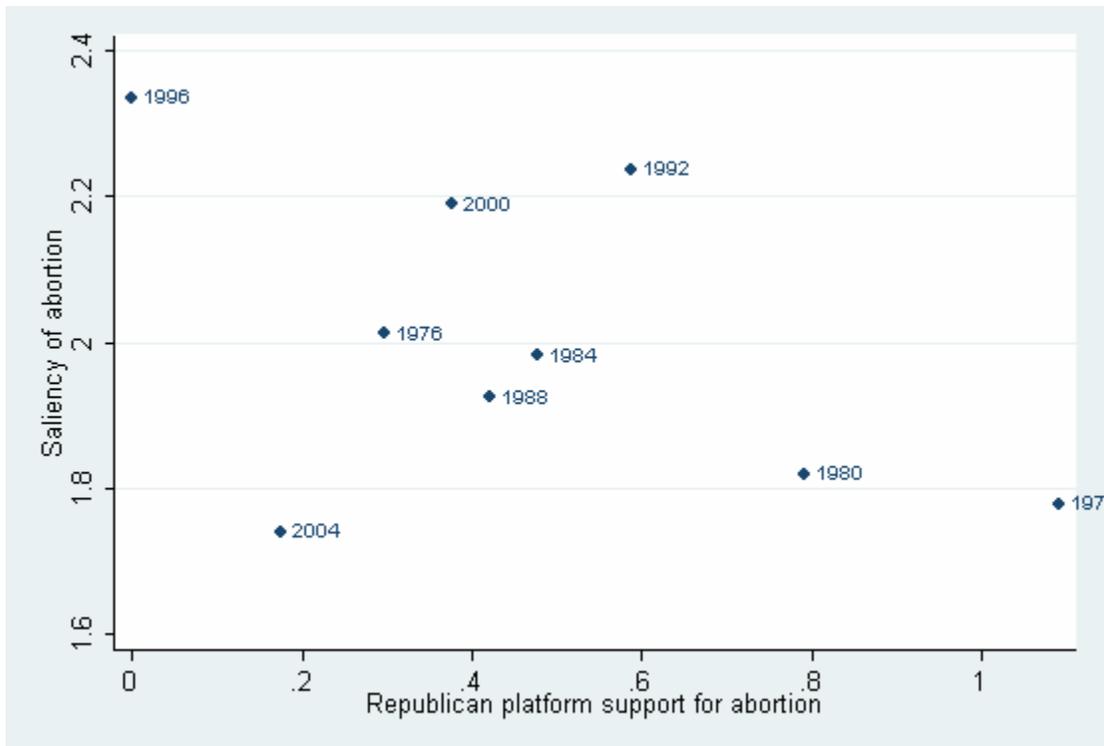


(b) Saliency

Figure 5. Republican abortion position vs. independent variables

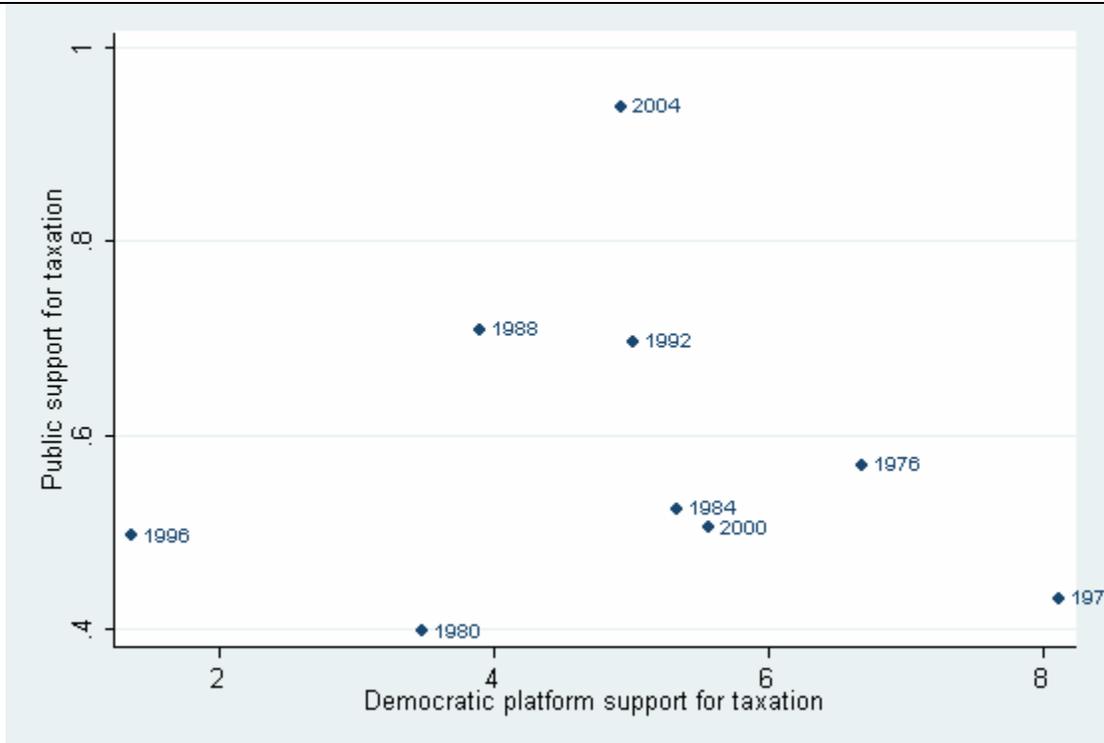


(a) Public opinion

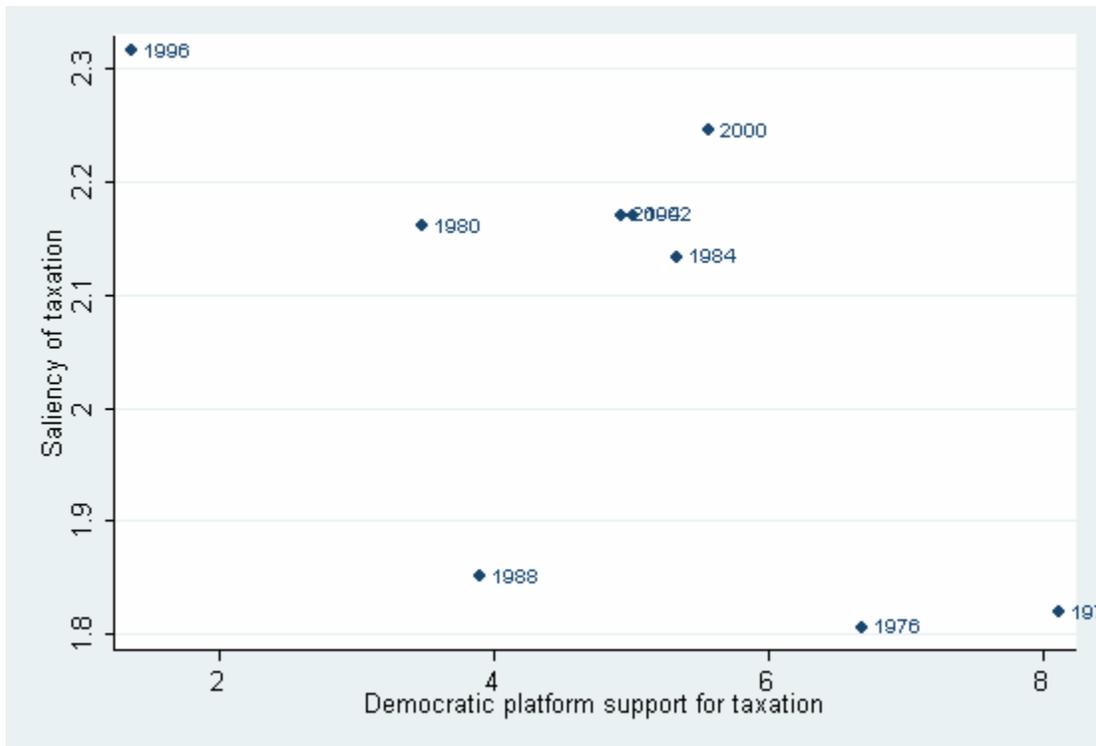


(b) Saliency

Figure 6. Democratic taxation position vs. independent variables

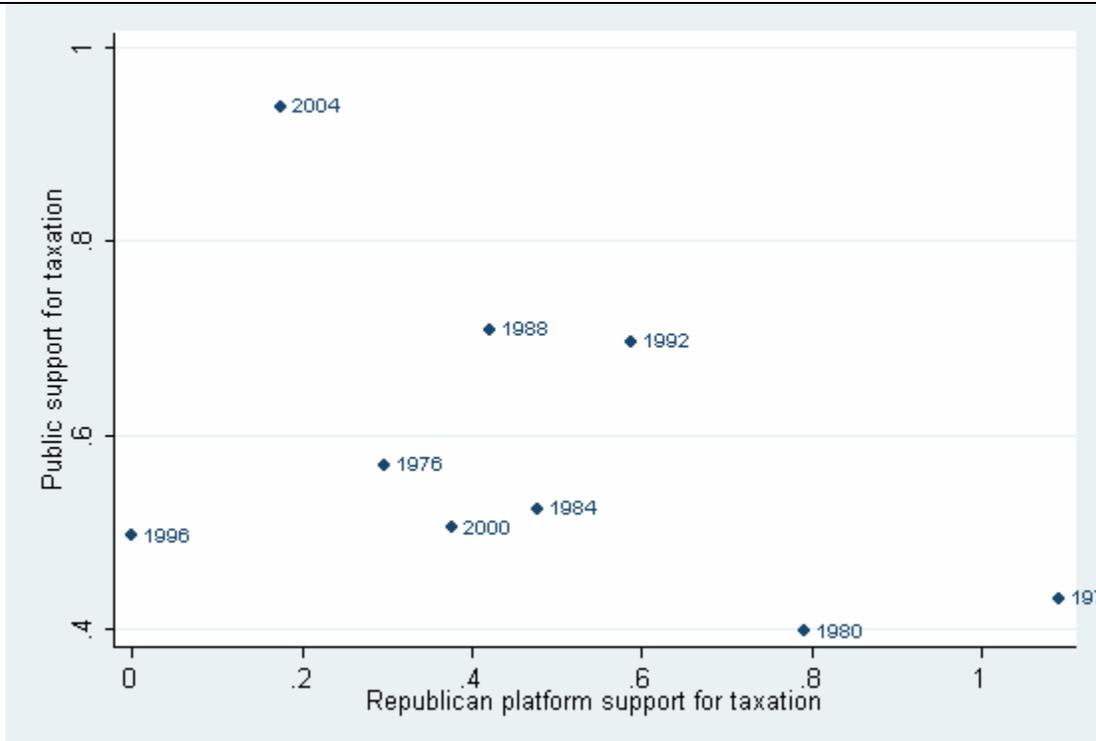


(a) Public opinion

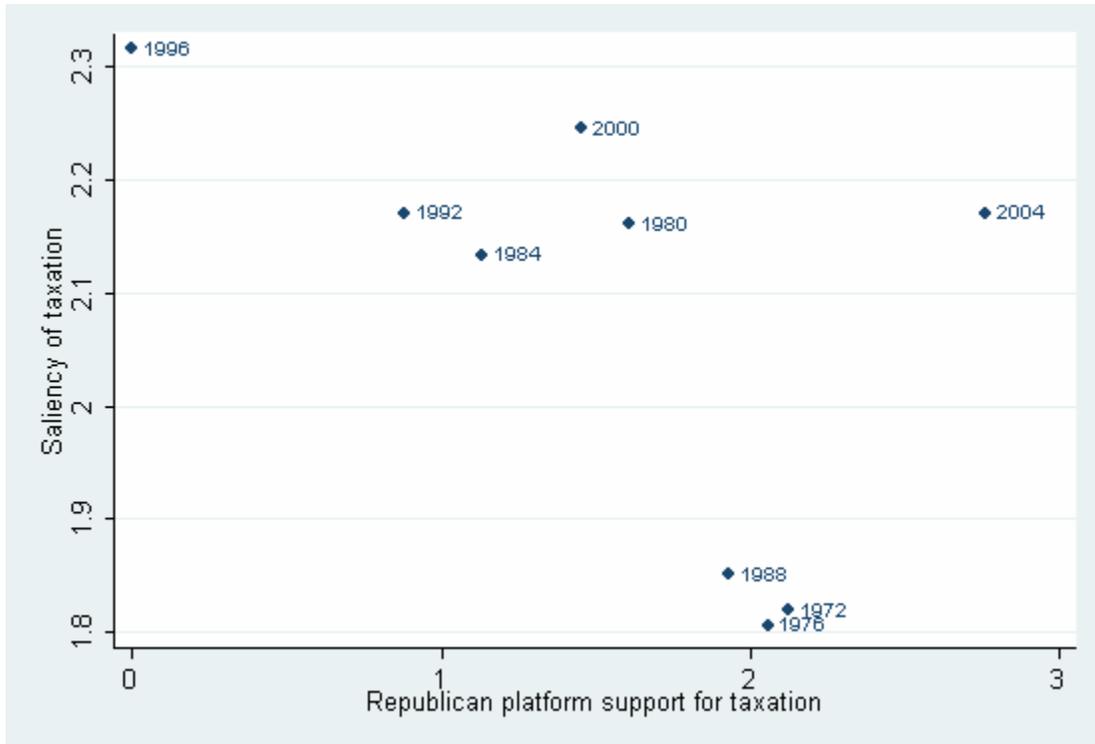


(b) Saliency

Figure 7. Republican taxation position vs. independent variables



(a) Public opinion



(b) Saliency

Figures 4 through 7 exhibit relationships between the dependent and independent variables of varying degrees. For example, Figure 4(a) appears to indicate a strong positive relationship between public support for abortion and Democratic party support, while Figure 5(b) indicates little such association for Republican party support.

Precise quantitative relationships are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Basic regression model coefficients

(a) Democratic abortion position			
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	9.57 (5.75)		-0.41 (5.19)
Saliency		2.22 (0.54)	2.26 (0.76)
R-squared	.28	.71	.71
(b) Republican abortion position			
	(1)	(2)	(3)

Variable Name	Bivariate	Bivariate	Multivariate
Opinion	-0.13 (3.95)		5.36 (4.41)
Saliency		-0.73 (0.51)	-1.25 (0.65)
R-squared	.0002	.23	.38

(c) Democratic taxation position

Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	-0.54 (4.28)		-0.40 (3.58)
Saliency		-6.25 (2.89)	-6.24 (3.12)
R-squared	.002	.40	.40

(d) Republican taxation position

Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	2.02 (1.63)		2.08 (1.35)
Saliency		-2.39 (1.28)	-2.42 (1.17)
R-squared	.18	.33	.52

The results are generally discouraging. Standard errors of the *opinion* coefficients are very high across the board. Only Democratic positioning on abortion has an  $R^2$  over 0.6. And only Democratic platforms' relationships with *saliency* are statistically significant at the .95 level.

One interesting finding is that the statistically significant *saliency* coefficient is positive for the Democrats on the issue of abortion, and negative for the Democrats on the issue of taxation. This suggests that with greater saliency of the abortion issue, the more likely are the Democrats to express their support – and with greater saliency of the taxation issue, the less likely are the Democrats to take a stand. Perhaps the Democrats

have been calculating that the abortion issue is favorable to them, while the taxation issue is not.<sup>6</sup>

## B. Further analysis

The apparent sensitivity of party positioning to changes in issue saliency – each point of change in *saliency* produces up to 6 points of change in *position* – raises the question of causality by interaction effects. As mentioned earlier, treating *saliency* alone as an independent variable may constitute an invalid specification. Accordingly, the above analysis will be replicated concomitant with equation (2), replacing the *saliency* variable with an interaction term between *saliency* and *opinion*.

Multicollinearity will obviously be more of a problem under this problem, owing to the interaction term’s close relationship with the other independent variable, *opinion*. Indeed, autocorrelation runs as high as 0.96 (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation of public opinion with opinion-saliency interaction effects

Issue	Correlation Coefficient
Abortion	.794
Taxation	.957

The interaction term appears similar to *saliency* – both time series show a general rise in the taxation variable, and show a peak for abortion in the 1990s (Figure 8). This abortion peak is matched in the interaction term by a dip in taxation’s saliency during the

<sup>6</sup> This theory would seem to be supported by the large negative *t*-value for Republican taxation saliency; with greater saliency of the taxation issue, Republicans are more likely to express their opposition, perhaps indicating that they consider taxes to be a winning issue.

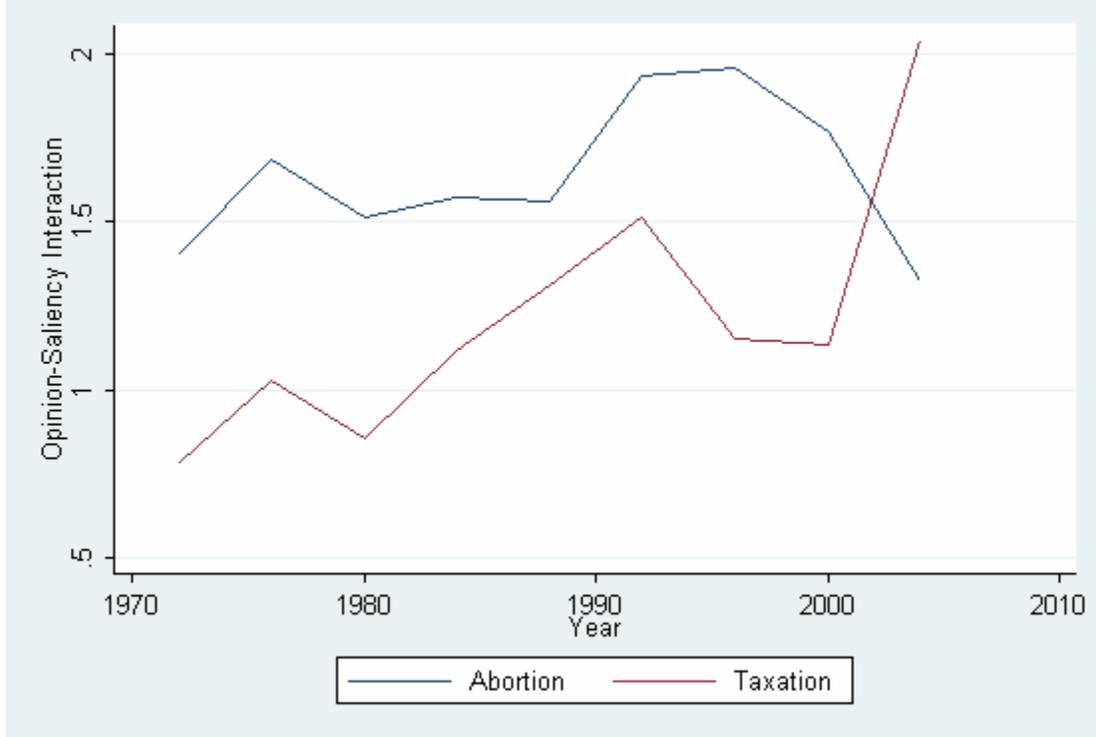
However, there is contrary evidence in the form of Figure 1(a) – Democrats have appeared to emphasize abortion more when they were the incumbent party and thus had more electoral security, and have de-emphasized abortion when they were not the incumbent party, possibly in an effort to regain power. This fact might indicate that Democrats do not consider abortion to be a winning issue.

1990s, while the pure *saliency* variable shows no such dip. Spatially, the interaction term appears closely linked with Democratic support for abortion, while bearing little obvious relationship with the other three dependent variables (Figure 9 and 10).

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Figure 8. Opinion-saliency interaction effects of abortion and taxation

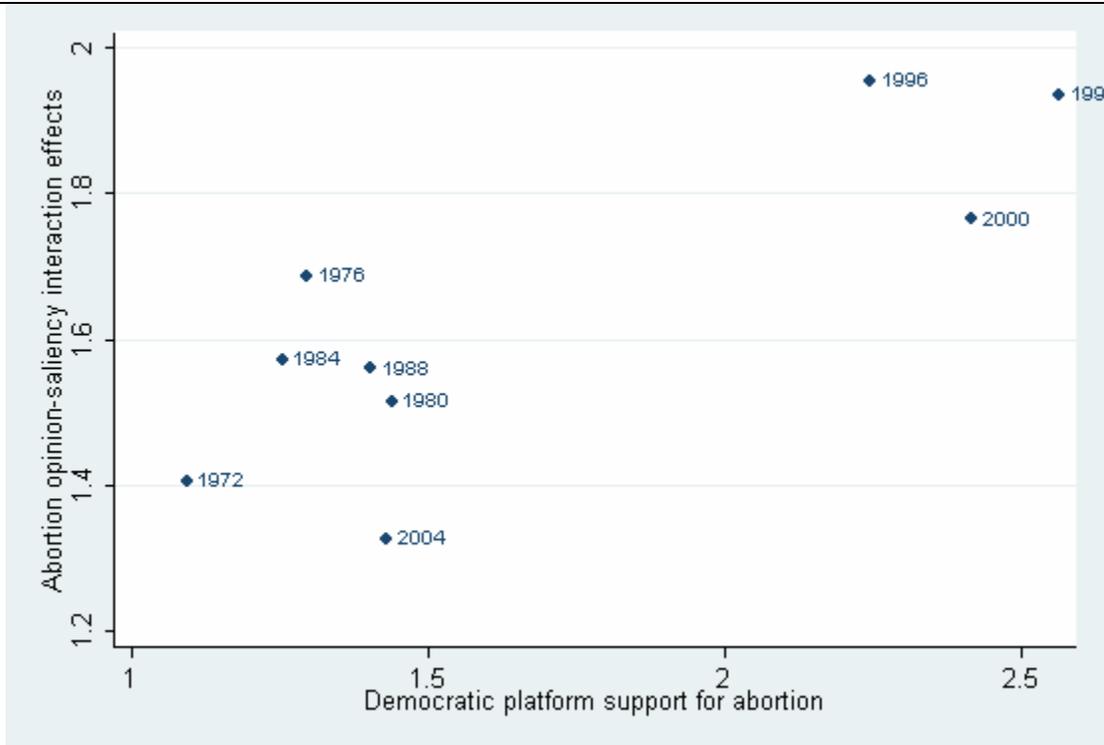
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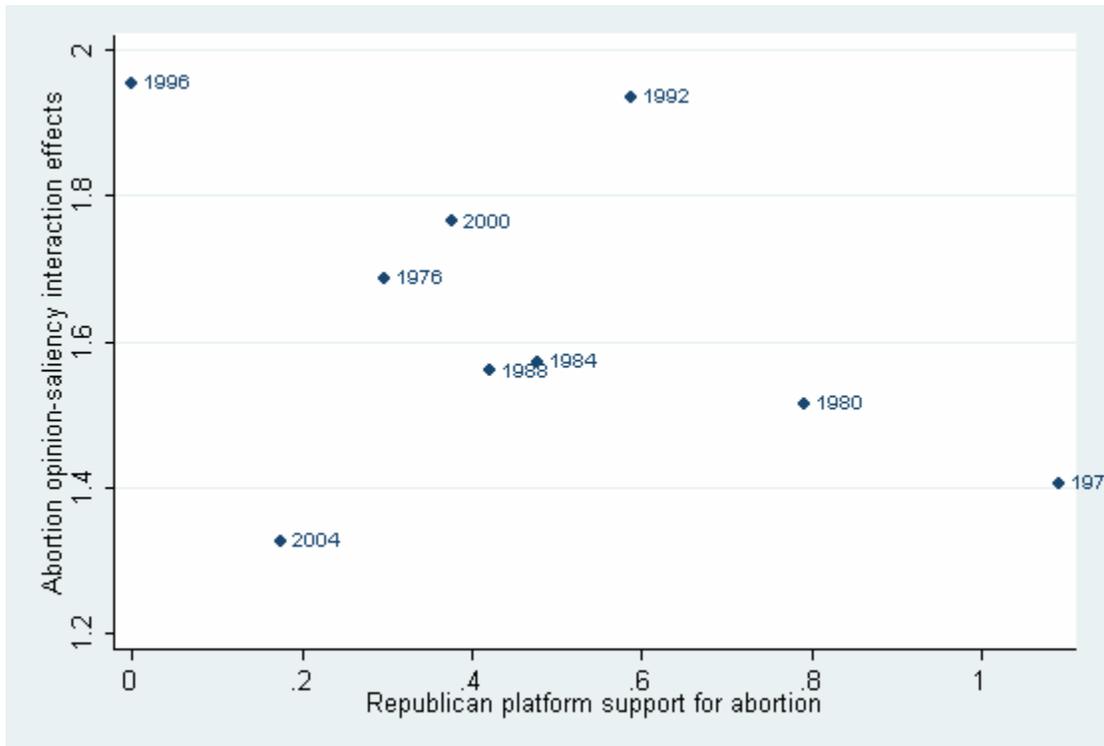
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Figure 9. Party platform abortion position vs. interaction effects

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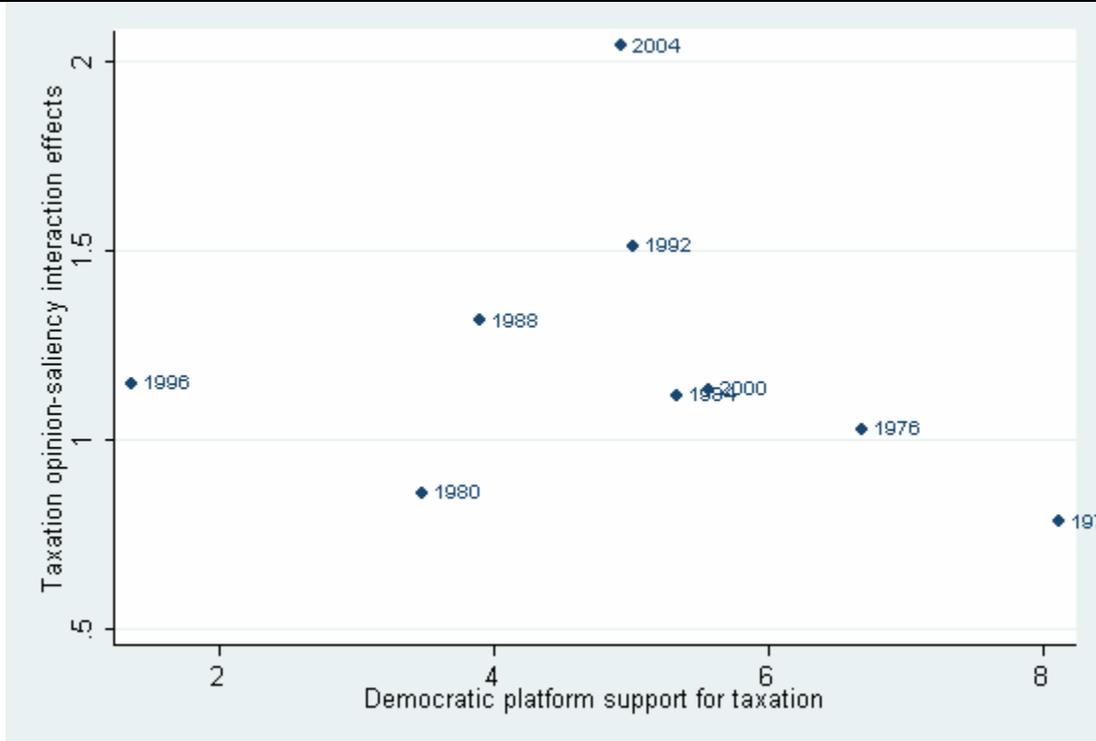


(a) Democratic

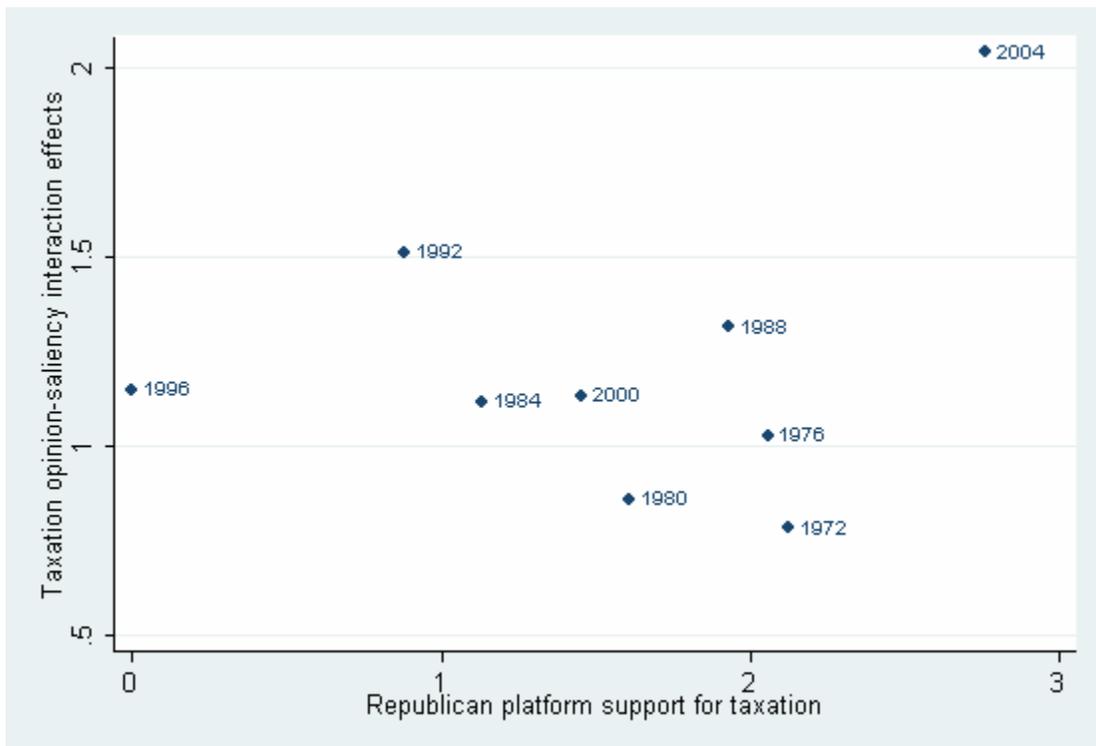


(b) Republican

Figure 10. Party platform taxation position vs. interaction effects



(a) Democratic



(b) Republican

Results of the modified regression model are given in Table 4. The interaction coefficient for Democratic abortion support is still statistically significant, while the interaction coefficient for Democratic taxation support is no longer significant.

Table 4. Coefficients of regression model incorporating interaction effects

(a) Democratic abortion position			
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	9.57 (5.75)		-5.98 (6.38)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction		2.11 (0.55)	2.79 (0.91)
R-squared	.28	.68	.72
(b) Republican abortion position			
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	-0.13 (3.95)		8.38 (5.50)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction		-0.58 (0.52)	-1.53 (0.78)
R-squared	.0002	.15	.39
(c) Democratic taxation position			
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	-0.54 (4.28)		18.32 (13.77)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction		-0.97 (1.89)	-8.85 (6.18)
R-squared	.002	.03	.26
(d) Republican taxation position			
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Multivariate
Opinion	2.02 (1.63)		10.16 (4.98)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction		0.55 (0.78)	-3.82 (2.24)
R-squared	.18	.07	.45

Notably, the *opinion* coefficient on Republican taxation support has now become statistically significant, with a very large coefficient of 10.16. In other words, the more that the public is willing to accept taxation, the more that the Republicans support taxation, indicating that the party’s position on this issue is somewhat malleable (and definitely more so than their position on abortion).

Neither the basic regression model nor the modified interaction-effects model seem to have a decisive advantage. The basic model seems slightly better at incorporating saliency effects, while the modified model seems superior at incorporating opinion effects; each has its own strengths and weaknesses.<sup>7</sup>

Both models, however, suffer from the weakness of a small sample size, which accounts for the notably high standard errors. It is in an effort to correct this that we turn to the third and final regression analysis.

Table 5. Complete multivariate regression results

(a) Democratic abortion position						
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Bivariate	(4) Multivariate	(5) Multivariate	(6) Multivariate
Opinion	9.57 (5.75)			-0.41 (5.19)	-5.98 (6.38)	-38.5 (41.2)
Saliency		2.22 (0.54)		2.26 (0.76)		-13.8 (17.2)
Interaction			2.11 (0.55)		2.79 (0.91)	19.5 (20.9)
R-squared	.28	.71	.68	.71	.72	.75

(b) Republican abortion position						
Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Bivariate	(4) Multivariate	(5) Multivariate	(6) Multivariate
Opinion	-0.13 (3.95)			5.36 (4.41)	8.38 (5.50)	19.3 (37.4)
Saliency		-0.73		-1.25		4.60

<sup>7</sup> Considering both *saliency* and interaction effects yields the results in Table 5; as is evident, extreme multicollinearity renders none of the coefficients statistically significant.

		(0.51)		(0.65)		(15.63)
Interaction			-0.58		-1.53	-7.12
			(0.52)		(0.78)	(19.0)
R-squared	.0002	.23	.15	.38	.39	.40

(c) Democratic taxation position

Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Bivariate	(4) Multivariate	(5) Multivariate	(6) Multivariate
Opinion	-0.54 (4.28)			-0.40 (3.58)	18.32 (13.77)	-109.82 (43.1)
Saliency		-6.25 (2.89)		-6.24 (3.12)		-34.7 (11.4)
Interaction			-0.97 (1.89)		-8.85 (6.18)	51.7 (20.3)
R-squared	.002	.40	.03	.40	.26	.74

(d) Republican taxation position

Variable Name	(1) Bivariate	(2) Bivariate	(3) Bivariate	(4) Multivariate	(5) Multivariate	(6) Multivariate
Opinion	2.02 (1.63)			2.08 (1.35)	10.16 (4.98)	-19.7 (22.5)
Saliency		-2.39 (1.28)		-2.42 (1.17)		-8.10 (5.97)
Interaction			0.55 (0.78)		-3.82 (2.24)	10.3 (10.6)
R-squared	.18	.33	.07	.52	.45	.60

### C. Panel study

Since this chapter tracks numerous individual units (party platforms) over time, it is possible to conduct a panel study.<sup>8</sup> Considering the Democratic and Republican platforms in parallel allows the sample size to be increased to 18 – in the separate cases of abortion and taxation – or even 36, if abortion and taxation are likewise lumped together.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> An ideal panel study would include a dummy variable for each year, but there are insufficient degrees of freedom to permit such an approach.

<sup>9</sup> The low-sample-size problem could also be partially mitigated by extending the time period under investigation. However, since abortion was not a salient public issue until the 1960s, this approach would only add two data points at best.

A panel study is also useful in that a fixed effects regression can control for omitted variables – in this case, the notable omitted variables being the public opinion and saliency of issues amongst a party’s core supporters, as opposed to the public at large. Parties might figure that since not many people actually read their platforms, they are ripe for adding material to appeal to the base even for issues that are not particularly popular or salient amongst the general public. This effect might account in part for the high standard errors of the earlier regressions, and could be partially mitigated via a panel study.

Multiple variations of the panel study will be conducted: considering abortion only, considering taxation only, and considering both abortion and taxation. As it is unclear whether issue saliency or an opinion-saliency interaction terms holds more explanatory power, both options will be considered.

Results of the panel study are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Panel study  
(a) Without interaction effects

Variable Name	(1) Abortion	(2) Taxation	(3) Abortion and taxation
Opinion	2.48 (4.80)	0.84 (1.90)	1.14 (1.56)
Saliency	0.51 (0.70)	-4.33 (1.65)	-1.63 (0.93)
R-squared (within regression)	.14	.33	.10

(b) With interaction effects, without saliency

Variable Name	(1) Abortion	(2) Taxation	(3) Abortion and taxation
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Opinion	1.20 (6.01)	14.2 (7.04)	3.72 (2.47)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction	0.63 (0.86)	-6.33 (3.16)	-1.27 (1.37)
R-squared (within regression)	.14	.23	.04

(c) With both interaction effects and saliency

Variable Name	(1) Abortion	(2) Taxation	(3) Abortion and taxation
Opinion	-9.63 (38.9)	-64.8 (27.2)	-45.7 (10.4)
Saliency	-4.59 (16.3)	-21.4 (7.21)	-16.8 (3.41)
Opinion-Saliency Interaction	6.20 (19.8)	31.0 (12.8)	22.0 (4.83)
R-squared (within regression)	.14	.54	.48

The results are encouraging. Most taxation coefficients are statistically significant, indicating that parties are less likely to support taxation when it is a salient issue (presumably because taxes only become a salient issue when the public is upset about them being too high).

The complete panel study (Table 6(c)) yields the best results thus far, with opinion, saliency, and opinion-saliency interaction all having statistically significant coefficients. The opinion and saliency coefficients are negative, while the interaction term's coefficient is positive. As a general rule, then, parties are relatively unlikely to express support for issues that are popular but not salient, or salient but not popular – and they are relatively likely to express support for issues that are both salient and popular. This is an intuitive finding.

## VI. Conclusion

Each component of this chapter's analysis has given rise to its own substantive conclusions.

The basic model's results indicate that Democrats may prefer to focus on the abortion issue and Republicans prefer to focus on the taxation issue, believing that their stances on these issues are broadly in line with public sentiment; likewise, Democrats may shy away from the taxation issue if they believe their stance is unpopular.

The interaction-effect model's results indicate that Republicans may adopt more flexible positions on taxation than on abortion, presumably because those beliefs are more deeply felt.

The panel study's results indicate that both parties significantly reduce their support for taxation when it becomes a relevant issue, that taxation holds more explanatory power than abortion as a whole with respect to party positioning, and that both parties are most likely to adopt strong support for issues that are both salient and popular.