

Rachel Porter

Ph.D. Candidate

Email: rachsur@live.unc.edu

Phone: 678-982-9701

URL: rachelporter.org

Research Statement

My research employs advanced quantitative methods and original data collections to offer new perspectives on established theories about American political institutions. In single-authored and collaborative work, I explore candidate emergence, success, and campaign behavior in congressional elections. My dissertation extends this research agenda by assessing whether candidates still run on locally-oriented issues in today’s “nationalized” campaign environment. Most recently, I have taken an interest in understanding how shifts in electoral trends impact legislative outcomes.

Nationalized and Locally-Oriented Campaigns for Congress (Dissertation)

The conception of elections as a critical link between legislators and the interests of constituents dates back to *Federalist No. 10*. In his essay, James Madison argues for a model of government where representatives advocate for district needs and communicate local preferences. Fast forward to the mid-20th century; scholars like Fenno and Mayhew also note the significance of local issues in their seminal works. Modern candidates for the House of Representatives, however, appear to employ an altogether different approach to elections. These politicians are perceived to run on partisan, “nationalized” platforms rather than projects and problems important to their district. It would seem that, in today’s campaigns, the adage “all politics is local” no longer rings true.

In my dissertation, I assert that this understanding of campaigns misses the mark. I demonstrate that—even though House elections attend more to national issues than before—candidates still often “go local.” Rather than considering campaigns as either national or local, I conceptualize these tactics as opposite ends of a spectrum of choices. My theoretical framework allows for the possibility that candidates adopt national party positions while *also* highlighting local concerns. For some candidates, this may mean discussing district-specific policies alongside national party positions. For others, “going local” may not involve taking up district-specific issues but, rather, using local considerations to craft party-driven messages.

To assess campaign strategy in modern elections, I employ an original data set of text from campaign websites for *all* primary and general election candidates in 2018 and 2020 who had an official campaign site. Campaign websites are well-suited for testing my theory because they (1) provide a near complete inventory of the issues important to a candidate’s campaign, and (2) are largely representative of the population of campaigns. To compile these data, I developed an automated web scraper capable of crawling through websites to find and collect candidates’ campaign platforms. This text was next cleaned of extraneous source-code, parsed into individual platform points, and labeled for major topic-area by a team of over fifteen research assistants, whom I have managed since 2018. This collection is the *first* comprehensive data set of text on campaign position-taking.

In my first dissertation chapter, I investigate how increasingly safe congressional districts impact elite behavior. In 1970, over 40 percent of districts were considered competitive; in 2018, a paltry 10 percent fell into this category. Today, for those many politicians who run in districts safe for their own party, winning the primary may be the only obstacle to attaining office. Pleasing ideologically-extreme primary voters, then, becomes of the highest importance. Consequently, I posit that increasingly safe districts are partially to blame for our state of nationalized politics. To test this theory, I couple a technique called multilevel regression with synthetic poststratification

(MrsP) with the validated voter information for 2.7 million primary election voters to create a direct measure for partisan primary constituency ideology at the congressional district-level. Using my new measure, I show that incumbents are less representative of same-party primary voter preferences when the general election is competitive for both parties. These results emphasize the important role that primaries play in motivating candidate behavior in modern elections. An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at several conferences, including the Society for Political Methodology’s annual meeting, and is currently under review.

Drawing on these results, my second chapter argues that districts with fierce two-party competition have unique electoral conditions that motivate candidates to play down their partisanship. Moderate voters—who are vital to winning competitive races—can be put off by candidates who place the party they belong to ahead of the people they want to represent. A platform that incorporates locally-driven issues, conversely, may help demonstrate a commitment to the district. Accordingly, I suspect that candidates who run in competitive districts will be more likely to take up *local* issues—policies that address needs unique to a specific constituency. Employing a multi-level model where the share of a candidate’s platform as “locally-oriented” is expressed as a function of individual candidate characteristics and electoral factors, I find support for my theory.

Departing from traditional conceptions of local issues, I also suggest that candidates may “go local” through the rhetoric they use to discuss nationally-important issues. In one test of this theory, I pair campaign platform text with a keyword assisted topic model (keyATM) to investigate Republican candidates’ position-taking on policies related to illicit drugs and narcotics. Unlike other topic models, the keyATM allows for user-specified keywords to aide in the estimation of topics before model fitting. I assess how much candidates cover topics in their platforms defined by terms such as “enforce,” “law,” and “treatment” to determine if local conditions can motivate Republican candidates to stray from their party’s national position on drugs. I find that Republicans tended to be *less* “tough on crime” and *friendlier* towards addiction treatment if their district had a greater-than-average rate of opioid-related deaths. In the immediate future, I plan to assess whether other local considerations—for instance, the previous occurrence of a mass-shooting event—can also impact a candidate’s propensity to deviate from her party’s positions on national issues.

Descriptive Representation & Congressional Campaigns

In collaborative work with Maura McDonald and Sarah Treul, I further evaluate the ways in which electoral conditions impact campaign position-taking. In “Changing the Dialogue,” (under review) we find a strong relationship between the emergence of candidates with a unique identity (i.e. veterans, women, and Black candidates) and their same-party primary opponents’ issue adoption. For example, we show that the presence of a Democratic female in a primary is associated with a near *thirty percentage-point* increase in the probability that her male opponents take up women’s issues in their own platforms. Employing an unsupervised form of content analysis called structural topic modeling (STM), we next assess the substance of candidates’ platform points on veteran, women, and Black-associated issues. STMs use machine learning techniques to uncover textual topics or “themes” based on word co-occurrences. Our findings suggest that identity-holders and candidates who do not share this identity are remarkably consistent in how they talk about issues of interest. Finally, in our comparison of primary and general election platform text, we demonstrate that this website content remains largely unchanged over the course of elections. Our findings indicate that position-taking in the primary will have long-term consequences on campaign strategy.

In the paper “Running as a Woman?,” these same coauthors and I take advantage of the large number of women who ran for Congress in 2018 to investigate if men and women differ in their campaign “presentation of self.” Pairing text data on biographical narratives from candidate websites with a series of STMs, we find that women choose to emphasize their electoral experience and

diversity above all else in their campaigns for Congress. We also show that prior political experience, more so than gender, is the key cleavage defining how candidates (both men and women) present themselves. Finally, we present evidence that female candidates are strategic in their self-presentation choices, emphasizing their gender in friendly Democratic districts and playing it down in Republican safe seats. The article associated with this project has been accepted for publication by *Political Research Quarterly* and is available online.

Candidate Experience in Congressional Elections

My interest in primaries originates from a coauthored project with Sarah Treul. Primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives have traditionally been thought to be low-stakes affairs. However, the dynamics of congressional primaries have changed dramatically over the past decade. These trends lead us to question whether traditional theories of candidate success translate to today's primary electoral landscape. Using newly compiled data on the political and professional background of primary candidates, we show that past political experience is no longer the overriding predictor for primary election success. In our data collection, we successfully located information for 26,273 primary candidates or 89% of individuals who ran between 1980 and 2018. To our knowledge, this is the first data set on primary congressional elections that comprehensively codes whether or not a candidate had prior experience as an elected official before running for Congress.

Pairing these data on past political experience with the campaign website text discussed above, Sarah Treul and I plan to create a typology for campaign styles in modern elections. We endeavor to understand how political trends towards amateurism (i.e. anti-establishment rhetoric, anti-Washington sentiment, backlash towards career politicians) affect the ways in which candidates present themselves to voters. We anticipate that this shift may be especially detrimental to female candidates who, according to a volume of literature and our own research, are especially likely to amass and advertise their political experience. We also plan to evaluate if and how the increasing number of amateurs elected to office impact the quality of legislative outcomes and, moreover, affect congressional productivity. The book manuscript for this project is under development with an expected completion date of Summer 2021.

Emerging Projects

In my dissertation, one of the principal methods I employ is the keyword assisted topic model (keyATM) developed by Eshima, Imai, and Sasaki (2020). Building off of this framework, Kouske Imai, Santiago Olivella, and myself offer an extension to keyATM that allows for the estimation of common topics from multiple corpora. Existing methods for topic discovery relying on latent dirichlet allocation (LDA) rest on the assumption that documents come from a single collection, or—in other words—documents are all the same type (e.g. newspaper articles, floor speeches, or television transcripts). Our work relaxes this assumption such that the underlying semantic structure of corpora can vary without sacrificing the quality estimated topics. This software will greatly expand the ways in which topic models can be used to answer political questions.

I plan to employ this multi-corpora keyATM software to extend my own dissertation research. More specifically, I seek to measure how closely congressional candidates follow party positions on issues-of-the-day and, under what conditions, they show less “partisan-consistency.” Current work on position-taking dichotomously examines candidates’ uptake of party-owned issues—topics for which the public trusts a particular party to handle an issue better than the opposition party. Extending this literature, I plan to evaluate the *substance* of candidate positions, thus broadening our understanding of the circumstances that motivate candidates to break with the party line.