Issue Convergence Is Nothing More Than Issue Convergence

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that candidate issue convergence or "dialogue" is beneficial for voters in campaigns. Using a lagged weekly measure of issue convergence in political advertising about specific campaign issues from the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, I show that dialogue, as it is currently defined by campaigns and elections scholars, is as likely to harm voters as it is to help them. These findings require scholars to think more deeply about what role, if any, issue convergence plays in deliberative campaigns.

Keywords

issue convergence, political advertising, campaign effects, dialogue, deliberation, political communication

The belief that deliberation and debate are necessary for the health of a democracy is foundational in democratic political thought. For example, in his eulogy of Athens, Pericles says the period of discussion preceding a political decision in a democracy is "an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all." Voting is the most essential political decision in a democracy, which means that citizens—including candidates—should deliberate during the campaign period. This has led to calls for reforms that offer citizens an opportunity to deliberate (Ackerman and Fishkin 2005) or create deliberative "shortcuts" enabling them to vote as if they had deliberated, such as deliberative polls (Fishkin 1995) or ballot notations created by citizen panels (Gastil 2000), among others. Other scholars have focused on the need for deliberation among candidates and sought to understand how often it occurs and what gives rise to it. They typically look for "dialogue" between candidates, that is, candidates engaging the arguments of their opponents rather than talking past them or simply ignoring them (Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Lipsitz 2011; Simon 2002; Wichowsky 2008). Because deliberation is often considered to be normatively desirable (but see Mutz 2006), it has also been assumed that dialogue, which is a way of conceptualizing deliberation in the campaign context, is also desirable. Yet, as I will demonstrate, using a weekly lagged measure of presidential candidate issue convergence in media markets across the country, dialogue between candidates harms voters as often as it helps them. I argue that this is because dialogue, as it has been conceptualized by campaigns and elections scholars, is merely "issue convergence," and whereas some candidate exchanges on a topic might enlighten voters, other exchanges might (perhaps intentionally) do just the opposite. As a result, I argue that scholars need to think more deeply about the role issue convergence plays in a deliberative campaign. At the very least, they can no longer assume that issue convergence is beneficial for voters.

How We Got from Deliberation to Issue Convergence

In this section, I discuss the trajectory of scholarship that lead from deliberation to issue convergence. I begin by providing a brief sketch of deliberation as a concept and how it was applied to the study of political campaigns. I then explain how empirical scholars honed in on "dialogue" as an essential and measurable element of candidate deliberation.

Deliberation

Deliberative democrats believe that thoughtful reflection and dialogue are the heart and legitimating force of democratic governance. Deliberation[1] differs from mere talk in terms of its purpose and how it is conducted. First, its goal is to enable participants to arrive at a decision

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that is consequential for some kind of governing process. It further requires participants to be respectful and to "constructively interact with" one another (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 79). A respectful interaction is noncoercive (Dryzek 2000), allows everyone a chance to speak and be heard, and requires participants to both listen to one another and remain open minded (Fishkin 1991; Gastil 1993; Gutmann and Thompson 1996).

Another key feature of deliberation is that individuals must explain their positions in plain language that others can understand. There is disagreement among deliberativists about the necessity for rationality and logic in deliberation, with some requiring that participants provide "public reasons," that is, reasons that are acceptable to all citizens. Such scholars often exclude religious reasons from deliberation (Cohen 1997; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Rawls 1993). Other scholars are inclined to allow deliberation to take a wider variety of forms, including rhetoric, irony, jokes, and testimony, among others (Barge 2002; Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Dryzek 2000; Young 1996).

The question for campaigns and elections scholars has been how to encourage deliberation in political campaigns, since it has a "scale" problem, as many scholars have noted (Dryzek 2000, 2010; Gastil 2007; Parkinson 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). In other words, what role can deliberation play in a campaign when participating in small group discussions is not possible for everyone? The first method proposed by James Fishkin is to use a deliberative poll (1995), which brings together a random sample of Americans to deliberate about their electoral choices. Clips of the deliberations and the results of the poll are then disseminated to the broader population through television news broadcasts and other forms of media. Other scholars have expanded on this "mini-public" concept (Fung 2003), leading to proposals for citizens' panels (Gastil 2000) and citizens' assemblies (Warren and Pearse 2008), among others. A more ambitious proposal for citizen deliberation is to hold a national Deliberation Day that would bring citizens together in small groups across the country to discuss and debate voting decisions (Ackerman and Fishkin 2005).

Enter "Dialogue"

Some campaigns and elections scholars focus on the role candidates can play in making elections more deliberative. This requires thinking about the electoral process as a deliberative system (Dryzek 2010; Gastil 2007; Parkinson 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012) and asking what kinds of candidate information make the system as a whole more "deliberative."[2] Several scholars have argued that dialogue,[3] or candidates discussing the same issues rather than talking past each other, is an essential element of a deliberative campaign (Lipsitz 2011; Simon 2002). In fact, Simon (2002) claims dialogue between candidates is *the* single most important element of such a campaign. Although he says that the presence of candidate dialogue in a campaign is only a "first step" toward meaningful deliberation, he makes expansive claims for it at the same time, saying it "moves every candidate to speak to every controversial theme" and "goes some way toward guaranteeing the public airing of minority views" (Simon 2002, 23). He also argues that dialogue "paves the way for deliberative majorities and legitimate democratic governance" (Simon 2002, 23).

Lee Sigelman and Emmett Buell (2004, 650) were the first scholars to express discomfort with Simon's use of the term *dialogue*. Instead of dialogue, they use the term *issue convergence* because "'dialogue' has so many denotations and connotations that extend beyond paying attention to the same issues." They point out that even when candidates discuss the same issues, their statements could be "so vague or ambiguous that even a reasonably attentive citizen would be unable to understand where they stood," or they could "frame them so differently as to present voters with dueling monologues rather than true dialogue" (Sigelman and Buell 2004, 650). Even so, Sigelman and Buell believe that issue convergence is normatively desirable and go on to examine how often it occurs in campaigns. Perhaps as a response to Sigelman and Buell's critique, other scholars have used the terms *dialogue* and *issue convergence* interchangeably (Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006), although some continue to refer to it as dialogue (Lipsitz 2011; Wichowsky 2008).[4] Irrespective of what it is called, virtually everyone agrees that it is desirable.

Yet, why should issue convergence—two candidates discussing the same issue—be helpful for voters? The general argument is that issue convergence will promote more thoughtful, considered opinions in voters. To support the notion that issue convergence in campaigns is good for voters, scholars cite psychology literature that shows dissent can motivate thinking (Nemeth 1995) or studies that show that people who are exposed to disagreement in their social networks are more able to provide reasons for why they hold certain beliefs, as well as reasons for why others might disagree with them (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002). Issue convergence might indeed have such effects if participants in an experiment are presented with carefully crafted opposing arguments (as in the case of the Nemeth study), or if the dialogue takes place among friends and associates whom one trusts (as in the Price et al. 2002 study). But this is generally not the kind of dialogue citizens encounter from candidates during campaigns. As Sigelman and Buell point out, candidates frequently have incentives to obfuscate and

prevaricate if not outright lie. For example, the opponent of a candidate, who is gaining traction with the public on a particular issue, might find it beneficial to obscure his own position or mislead voters about his opponent's more popular stance. One might object that this is a problem of obfuscation, prevarication, and lying, not of dialogue itself. Yet, dialogue—as it has been defined in the campaigns and elections literature—much like a conversation between two people can have any number of motives. Although we might envision a more ideal exchange, the term has been defined by campaigns and elections scholars simply as two candidates discussing the same issue, not as two candidates discussing the same issue honestly and clearly.

Furthermore, it is possible that voters might be confused when two candidates discuss the same issue in a campaign. In the advertising literature, when multiple brands advertise a similar product, it is called "competitive advertising," and research shows it interferes with the ability of consumers to remember product claims (Burke and Srull 1985; Keller 1987; Kent and Allen 1994). This is because consumers find it "difficult to remember which ad is associated with which brand in the product category" (Keller 1987, 318). This research also shows that competitive advertising can wipe out the benefits of ad repetition on recall (Burke and Srull 1985). If one likens candidates to a "brand" and discussion of a particular issue to "product category," one can imagine that similar confusion might result when two candidates discuss their positions on the same issue, particularly among less politically sophisticated individuals.

Most of the studies cited above assume that issue convergence is helpful for voters, but the evidence is decidedly mixed. One study found unequivocally positive effects on voters (Simon 2002), but two others found a range of effects, some even negative (Lipsitz 2011; Wichowsky 2008). Clearly, the verdict is still out on the benefits of dialogue, at least as it is currently defined in the campaign effects literature. Part of the problem, as I will discuss below, is that there is a considerable amount of disagreement among scholars about how to measure it.

Data and Method

Although most campaigns and elections scholars agree that dialogue involves candidates talking about the same issue, they disagree about how to measure its presence in a campaign. Simon (2002) coded newspapers for candidate statements about issues and whether the views expressed represented the viewpoint of the majority or minority. He then operationalized dialogue as the percentage of candidate issue mentions dedicated to minority positions, arguing that the more "the minority amount of information approaches the total amount of discussion, the more dialogue occurs" (Simon 2002, 107). Coding *New York Times* articles, Sigelman and Buell (2004, 653) argued for a different operationalization, which captured the percentage of overlap in the candidates' issue attention profiles. Noah Kaplan, David Park, and Travis Ridout used Sigelman and Buell's measure, but instead of coding newspaper articles, they used the Wisconsin Advertising Project's (WAP) coding of issue mentions in television advertisements.

A drawback of all these measures is that the researchers use an entire campaign as the unit of analysis. Lipsitz (2011) argued that the problem with calculating a single dialogue score for an entire electoral season is that we have no idea when the dialogue occurred during the campaign or, indeed, if dialogue occurred at all. Situations in which two candidates discuss the same issue—even if one discusses it in early September and the other does in late October—is considered to be "dialogue" despite the fact that it would be difficult to argue that the second candidate is responding to the first. Moreover, if one is trying to understand the effects of dialogue on voter knowledge, it is unreasonable to expect a voter to be able to compare the candidates' positions when they are discussed so far apart in a campaign. To create a dynamic measure of dialogue, Lipsitz uses the WAP's coding of issue mentions in ads to calculate the number of Republican and Democratic ads mentioning a particular issue aired in a given media market on any given day during the 2004 presidential campaign. She then created lagged seven-day measures of ad airings for each topic. To understand how dialogue affects voters, Lipsitz simply includes an interaction term for Republican and Democratic ads in her regression models.

The problem with the last two studies using the WAP coding of issue mentions is that the issue categories WAP uses are quite broad. For example, an advertisement might be coded as discussing "health care," but one has no way of knowing whether the ad discusses prescription drug coverage for seniors or limiting malpractice lawsuits against doctors. This study addresses this problem by ensuring that the specific issues mentioned in Republican and Democratic ads match. In addition, the handful of studies that have examined the effect of dialogue on voter knowledge have used general measures of political knowledge, such as the number of likes or dislikes a respondent can list about candidates (Simon 2002; Wichowsky 2008) or an index of political knowledge questions (Lipsitz 2011). This is the first study to examine how dialogue about a specific issue in television advertising affects the ability of voters to identify the candidates' positions on that specific issue.

To determine whether issue convergence is beneficial for citizens, the analysis combines advertising data from the WAP with individual-level survey data from the

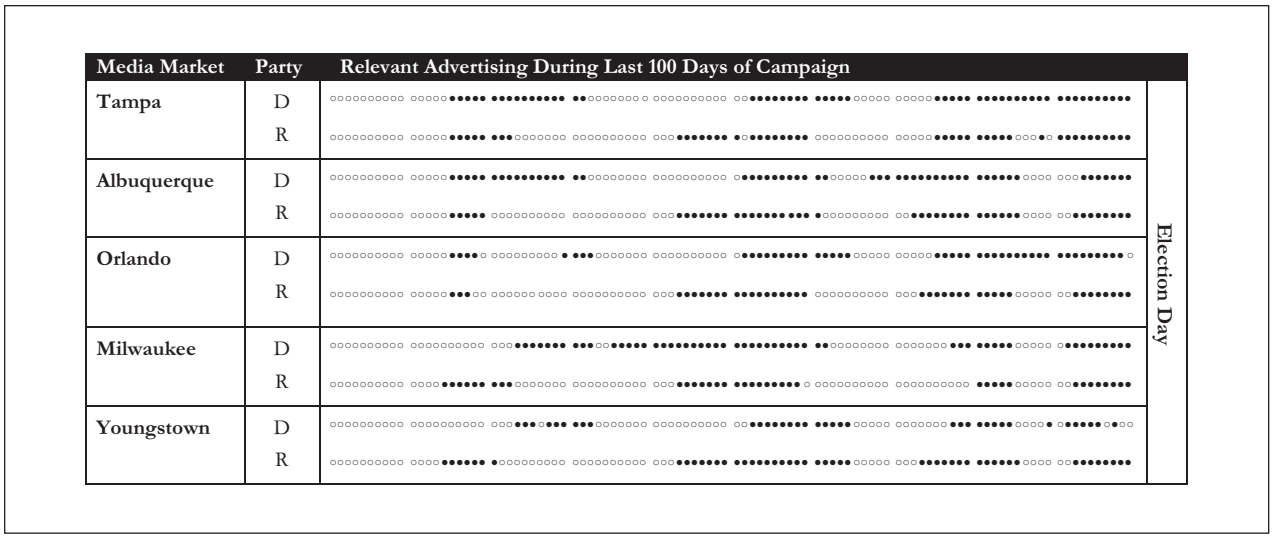

Figure 1. Democratic and republican advertising about health insurance during the 2004 campaign in five media markets.
Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project and the Campaign Media Analysis Group.
"D" indicates Democratic advertising and "R" indicates Republican advertising. The dots each represent one of the last hundred days of the campaign (from July 25 to November 1), with "●" indicating a day on which relevant ads were aired and "○" indicating that no relevant ads were aired. These media markets saw the most advertising about this issue.

National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAES) in 2000 and 2004 to assess how candidate dialogue about specific issues during a presidential campaign affects voter knowledge.[5] As mentioned above, the issue categories used by WAP are quite broad. Thus, for each issue mentioned in a political knowledge question on the 2000 and 2004 NAES survey, I examined the storyboards of all of the advertisements in the relevant WAP category to see whether any of the ads specifically mentioned the issue raised by the NAES question. This step is crucial because previous studies that have used these data have concluded that voters learn little from political advertising because they found no relationship between their advertising measure and the NAES knowledge questions (Huber and Arceneaux 2007). One possible explanation for this conclusion is that very few ads discuss the specific issues raised by the NAES knowledge questions.

The analysis revealed that the Annenberg survey often touched on topics that were not mentioned in campaign ads or were only mentioned by a single candidate. In fact, only four of the questions in 2000 and 2004 addressed issues that were specifically mentioned in ads by both candidates. In 2000, the issues that were addressed both by the NAES and the candidates' advertisements were allowing people to invest a portion of their social security in the stock market and providing prescription drug coverage to seniors. In 2004, the issues were allowing people to invest a portion of their social security in the stock market and using federal funds to ensure that all children have health insurance, as well as to help employers pay for employee health insurance. Once the relevant advertisements for each issue were identified, measures of advertising exposure were created for the media markets monitored by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), which provides the advertising data to WAP.

The final step was to create a measure of dialogue for the four issues identified in 2000 and 2004. Employing the method developed by Lipsitz (2011), I calculated daily measures of how many Republican and Democratic ads discussed each of the four issues for each designated media market during the 2000 and 2004 campaigns. Figure 1 illustrates this approach. The column on the left indicates the media market (in this case, the top 5 media markets featuring the relevant health care ads) and "D/R" indicates Democratic or Republican ads. Each dot indicates one of the last hundred days of the 2004 campaign with black dots indicating a day where a relevant health insurance ad was aired and a white dot indicating a day without a relevant advertisement. As one can see from the figure, there are many days where both Democrats and Republicans are airing ads in the same media market that address the issue of how to provide health insurance to children and workers, indicating a good deal of issue convergence.

Recent research suggests that advertising effects on voters decay rapidly (Gerber et al. 2011). Although virtually all of these studies have assessed the persuasive effects of ads rather than their effects on knowledge, it is probably safe to assume that the effects of advertising on knowledge decay rapidly as well. In fact, if one subscribes to an online rather than a memory-based theory of

information processing during campaigns (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995), it is likely that the knowledge effects of ads decay more rapidly than their persuasive effects, since the theory suggests that persuasive effects linger long after the ability to recall the original information that persuaded the individual disappears. To be safe, I calculated two-, three-, five-, seven-, and ten-day lagged advertising measures for the four issues identified from 2000 and 2004. The next step was to determine whether dialogue about these issues occurred in any of the 2000 and 2004 CMAG media markets. This was accomplished by assessing whether Republican and Democratic advertising about the issues of interest overlapped at any point. There were instances of overlapping advertising in all cases except the issue of allowing individuals to invest a portion of their social security in the stock market during the 2004 campaign. Both Bush and Kerry aired ads that discussed this topic, but never in the same media market at the same time. Thus, this issue was dropped from the analysis.

To assess the effect of issue convergence on voter knowledge, I simply included an interaction term for Republican and Democratic advertising in the models explaining voter knowledge. If issue convergence aids knowledge, then the interaction terms in the models should be positive, and their effect, combined with the effect of the constitutive terms, should yield an increase in the ability of respondents to correctly answer the question put to them. This would capture the idea that dialogue is greater than the sum of its parts, that is, the advertising of either side is more edifying when their arguments and claims are being countered by their opponents. In such instances, we can truly say that dialogue *boosts* knowledge. It is also possible that an interaction term is positive, but when it is combined with the effect of the constitutive terms, it does not yield an overall increase in knowledge. This could be due to the fact that one or both of the advertising measures' main effects is significantly negative. In such cases, dialogue does not boost knowledge but *prevents harm*. This might occur in a situation where a candidate airs an ad that is intended to obscure his position on an issue. Such an ad would decrease the ability of voters to correctly identify the candidate's position. If that candidate's opponent then airs ads to clarify the differences between the candidates, his ads might mitigate these harmful effects.

If dialogue is less helpful, however, then the direction of the interaction term may actually be negative. This could indicate one of two possibilities: (1) dialogue is confusing or (2) people can learn both candidates' positions from either Democratic or Republican ads. In the second scenario, if citizens have learned where the candidates stand from one side, the ads of the other side will have little effect because the individual already knows the information the ads contain. This might happen in a situation where a candidate is airing a contrast ad where he lays out his opponent's position as well as the position of his opponent. In this case, dialogue simply amounts to *duplication*. If duplication is occurring, the ads of either candidate in the absence of ads by the opponent should be positive and significant, and their helpfulness should diminish as the opponent begins to advertise. If confusion is occurring, however, we may see that one of the candidate's ads is helpful for voters while the other candidate's ads are not, and the interaction of the two diminishes the edifying power of the helpful ads. This effect should be especially pronounced among respondents who indicate that they have less interest in politics.

There is a considerable amount of debate in the literature about how political awareness mediates the effect of campaign communications on political learning. The one study that has specifically examined how political awareness mediates the relationship between *television advertising* and voter knowledge found that ads matter most for the politically unaware (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004). Although persuasion is different from learning, the bulk of the studies in this area have found persuasion effects of television ads to be strongest among the politically unaware or moderately aware (Franz and Ridout 2007; Huber and Arceneaux 2007). Thus, the effect of ads on learning is determined in part by an individual's interest in politics.[6] If the pattern observed in these studies holds here, the effects of candidate dialogue in television advertising—whatever they may be—should be felt most keenly by the politically unaware.[7]

In the following analyses, I coded responses to the issue knowledge measures "1" if the respondent could correctly identify a candidate's position on an issue and "0" if they could not. All those responding "don't know" were coded as answering the question incorrectly.[8] The logit models control for a wide variety of individual and contextual-level variables. In terms of individual-level variables, they control for standard demographic factors, including age, sex, education, income, race, as well as political variables such as political interest, partisan identification, and strength of partisanship. Since recent research on the relationship between age and political knowledge shows that it is often nonlinear (Lau and Redlawsk 2008), I include a quadratic term in the model to allow for this possibility. Media attention is measured by how many days in the previous week a respondent had read the newspaper. The contextual variables include a measure of the overall competitiveness of the state (Shaw 2006) and how many days remained from the time of the interview to the election.[9]

One drawback of this analysis is that the NAES does not ask the battery of questions recommended by Travis Ridout and his colleagues (2004) to gauge advertising

exposure, nor does it ask respondents whether they recall seeing an advertisement. As a result, the analysis runs the risk of underestimating the effects of issue convergence and television advertising, in general, on voter knowledge. This cannot be helped if one wishes to use a dynamic measure of dialogue, which requires pairing the WAP data with the NAES. Another shortcoming of this analysis is that it does not include measures of local media content, which might be affecting political knowledge. This could be a problem if the local media are discussing the same issues as the candidates in their ads because I would be unable to disentangle the advertising and local media effects. Although earlier studies found a high level of congruence between candidate messages and the themes discussed in newspaper coverage in presidential elections (Dalton et al. 1998; Just et al. 1996), more recent studies have found mixed or little evidence of convergence (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007; Hayes 2010; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003).

Results and Discussion

The analysis finds some evidence that issue convergence can boost knowledge, but it finds more evidence that it confuses voters. In two of three cases, it confuses political nonsophisticates, while it mitigates the harmful effects of one candidate's deceptive ads in the third case. The discussion proceeds by considering each instance of dialogue in turn. I first provide a brief overview of the candidates' actual positions on the issues in question and how those positions were portrayed in the ads. I then turn to the analysis of how candidate dialogue affected respondent knowledge during the campaign.

Case 1: Prescription Drug Coverage for Seniors in 2000

One of the main issues of the 2000 campaign was how to provide prescription drug coverage to America's senior citizens. Al Gore argued that prescriptions should be covered through Medicare. His plan set aside $253 billion over ten years to pay for a sliding scale of subsidies to cover prescription drugs for seniors opting to pay a $25 per month premium. In addition, Medicare would pay all drug costs above $4,000 per year. Bush's plan involved funding a four-year drug program for low-income seniors and the disabled that would be administered by the states. It also involved adding $158 billion to Medicare to pay 25 percent of seniors' private drug insurance premiums. In addition, Medicare would pay all drug costs above $6,000 per year.

The ads aired by Bush and Gore during the campaign were anything but enlightening with each using scare tactics and mischaracterizing the other's position. During the general election campaign, Bush and the Republican National Committee (RNC) relied on three ads to make their case against Gore. The one aired the most—more than 8,000 times between Labor Day and Election Day—was a contrast ad that described Bush's plan in the following terms: "Seniors choose and it covers all catastrophic healthcare costs." The same ad said, "Al Gore will charge seniors a new $600 a year government access fee . . . Gore's plan: When seniors turn 64, they must join a drug health maintenance organization (HMO) selected by Washington or they are on their own." Bush's second most aired ad on this topic (7,700 airings), in a similar fashion, described Gore's plan as forcing "seniors into a government-run HMO," whereas his plan, in contrast, gave "seniors a choice." The final ad, which was aired 4,600 times, said Gore was "pushing a big government plan that lets Washington bureaucrats interfere with what your doctors prescribe." Bush's plan, on the other hand would "add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare."

Gore relied heavily on a single ad, which he aired 3,500 times, to make his case. In it, he claimed,

> Newspapers say George Bush's prescription drug ad misrepresents the facts . . . George Bush forces seniors to go to HMOs and insurance companies for prescription drugs. They have no choice. And Bush leaves millions of middle class seniors with no coverage.

In the same ad, he defends his own plan by saying it "covers all seniors through Medicare, not an HMO. Under Gore, seniors choose their own doctor and doctors decide what drugs to prescribe."

In separate questions, the NAES question asked respondents whether Bush and Gore believed the federal government should (1) not pay for senior citizens' prescription drugs, (2) offer senior citizens a voucher to cover some of the costs of prescription drugs, or (3) cover prescription drugs through Medicare. Bush's plan, which involved subsidizing the cost of private insurance premiums, was closer to the second option, but the one ad in which he characterized his approach to paying for prescription drugs claimed he would "add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare," which might lead voters to opt for the third one. Gore clearly favored covering the cost of prescription drugs through Medicare, which his contrast ad stated. As a result, I expect Bush ads to have no effect or a mildly negative effect on voters' understanding of his position, whereas Gore's ads should help voters make sense of his approach. While Bush's ads mischaracterize Gore's approach as creating a "government-run HMO," it is unclear how his ads will affect respondents. If respondents hear "HMO," they might be inclined to believe that Gore favors giving citizens a voucher that they can take to

Table 1. The Effect of Issue Convergence on Respondents' Knowledge of the Candidates' Issue Positions in 2000 and 2004.

	Identifies Bush's Position			Identifies Gore's Position		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	All	High Interest	Low Interest	All	High Interest	Low Interest
Case 1: Prescription drug coverage in 2000						
Democratic ads (100)	−.16 (.14)	−.36* (.21)	−.06 (.19)	−.01 (.14)	−.15 (.22)	.03 (.18)
Republican ads (100)	−.05 (.07)	−.02 (.11)	−.08 (.09)	−.16** (.07)	−.10 (.12)	−.20** (.09)
Democratic ads × Republican ads	.27* (.14)	.26 (.24)	.29 (.18)	.33** (.14)	.34 (.25)	.35** (.18)
N	8,297	2,963	5,334	8,302	2,969	5,333
Log likelihood	−5,308.22	−1,972.81	−3,336.81	−5,408.31	−1,856.85	−3,567.22
Pseudo R^2	.04	.04	.02	.06	.02	.03
Case 2: Investing social security in 2000						
Democratic ads (100)	.12 (.23)	.01 (.44)	.17 (.27)	.11 (.22)	−.23 (.38)	.29 (.27)
Republican ads (100)	.46*** (.17)	.27 (.33)	.51*** (.20)	.03 (.15)	−.10 (.26)	.07 (.19)
Democratic ads × Republican ads	−.21 (.39)	.07 (.80)	−.35 (.46)	.18 (.37)	.71 (.67)	−.09 (.44)
N	5,908	2,163	3,745	5,907	2,162	3,745
Log likelihood	−3,408.59	−948.98	−2,428.00	−3,681.92	−1,204.79	−2,456.96
Pseudo R^2	.11	.09	.06	.09	.07	.05
Identifies Correct Candidate						
Case 3: Health coverage in 2004						
Democratic ads (100)	−.001 (.10)	−.14 (.15)	.09 (.13)			
Republican ads (100)	.11*** (.04)	.04 (.07)	.15*** (.06)			
Democratic ads × Republican ads	−.02 (.03)	.04 (.05)	−.07 (.04)			
N	8,536	3,636	4,900			
Log likelihood	−5,255.82	−2,145.77	−3,111.85			
Pseudo R^2	.10	.09	.08			

Source: 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies and the Wisconsin Advertising Project.
The dependent variables for 2000 are coded "1" if the respondent correctly identifies each candidate's position and "0" if he does not or responds "don't know." In 2004, the dependent variable is coded "1" if the respondent correctly identifies the candidate who wants "the government to provide health care to all children and help employers pay the cost of the workers' health insurance" (Kerry) and "0" for those who responded incorrectly or answered "don't know." In Models 1 and 4, the sample includes all respondents answering the question, while Models 2 and 5 are restricted to those indicating that they are "very interested" in politics, and Models 3 and 6 are restricted to those answering otherwise. The full models can be found in the online Appendix C and the models estimated without the interaction term in Appendix D.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$. ****$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

an HMO. If they fixate on "government-run," then they might actually pick the correct option, which is that Gore favors covering prescription drugs through Medicare. Gore's contention that Bush's plan would force people to go "to HMOs and insurance companies for prescription drugs" could suggest the correct answer (providing vouchers) or that Bush believes the federal government simply should not pay for prescriptions.

Table 1 contains the results of six models examining the effect of Republican and Democratic prescription coverage ads (a seven-day measure) on the ability of individuals to correctly identify how Bush and Gore wanted to provide prescription drug coverage to seniors.[10] Each of these models also contains an interaction term for Republican and Democratic ads, which captures the effect of issue convergence. Models 1, 2, and 3 examine the effect of ads on the ability of respondents to correctly identify Bush's position, with Models 2 and 3 restricted to individuals with high and low levels of interest in government, respectively. Models 4, 5, and 6 examine how prescription coverage ads affected knowledge of Gore's issue position, with Model 4 estimated based on the entire sample, and Models 5 and 6 restricted to individuals with high and low interest. In Model 1, we find some evidence that issue convergence can boost knowledge. Neither Democratic nor Republican ads mentioning the candidates' plans for providing prescription coverage directly affect respondents' ability to identify Bush's position on the issue. The coefficient for the interaction term, however, is positive and marginally significant. When the coefficient for the interaction term is combined with the coefficients for the constitutive terms (see Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2005), only the combination with the Republican ad coefficient is statistically significant (.21, $p < .05$). This indicates that even though Republican ads in the absence of Democratic ads do not help voters, Republican ads in the presence of a very high volume of Democratic ads (more than sixty ads or the 95th percentile

of Democratic ads) do, that is, hearing from *both* Gore and Bush about their plans for providing prescription drug coverage to seniors makes Bush's position clearer to respondents than if they had just heard from Bush. The similar size of the coefficients for Republican ads and the interaction term in Models 2 and 3 suggest this effect is—surprisingly—not moderated by political interest.[11] In Model 2, Democratic ads have a marginally negative effect on the ability of political sophisticates to identify Bush's position (−.36, $p < .10$), which is mitigated by the presence of Republican ads as the coefficient for the interaction term indicates (.26, *ns*). This appears to be a case of issue convergence preventing harm.

In Models 4, 5, and 6, we find stronger evidence that issue convergence can both prevent harm and boost knowledge. Republican ads that mention the topic of prescription coverage for seniors have a negative effect on the ability of respondents to identify Gore's position in the absence of Democratic ads on the topic. This is indicated by the −.16 coefficient ($p < .05$) for Republican ads in Model 4. Democratic ads have no effect on issue knowledge in the absence of Republican ads, but the coefficient for the interaction term (.33, $p < .05$) suggests that issue convergence significantly helps respondents. Specifically, Democratic ads help mitigate the harmful effect of Republican ads and the presence of Republican ads boosts the edifying nature of Democratic ads. If we examine Models 5 and 6, we see that these effects are strongest among those with less interest in government. Model 5 shows that political sophisticates were not significantly affected by the ads. In Model 6, the −.20 ($p < .05$) coefficient for Republican ads indicates their effect in the absence of Democratic ads. As in Model 4, we also see that Democratic ads in the absence of Republican ads are not especially helpful for voters (.03, *ns*), while the .35 ($p < .05$) coefficient for the interaction term indicates the positive effect of issue convergence. The first panel in Figure 2 illustrates these effects using predicted probabilities.[12] The *y*-axis shows the predicted probability that a respondent was able to correctly identify the manner in which Gore wanted to provide prescription drugs to seniors. The graph shows the effect of Republican ads on knowledge at low, moderate, and high levels of Democratic ads.[13] The light gray lower line shows that, in the absence of Democratic ads, Republican ads have a significantly negative effect on the ability of respondents to identify Gore's position. At a moderate level of Democratic advertising, the magnitude of this negative effect lessens and then completely disappears at a high level of Democratic advertising. The graph illustrates quite clearly that in this case, the presence of Democratic advertising prevented harm.

Why were Gore and Bush's attacks so harmful? Further analysis reveals that respondents exposed to Gore's ads were more likely to say that Bush believed the government should not pay for seniors' drugs, which suggests they focused on Gore's claim that Bush's plan would "force seniors to go to . . .insurance companies." Respondents exposed to Bush's ads were significantly more likely to say that Gore favored "giving people vouchers to cover some costs of prescription drugs."[14] Respondents then may have fixated on the term "HMO" in Bush's ads. Gore's response ads challenged this misinformation by stating that he favored a plan that "covers all seniors through Medicare, not an HMO." Overall

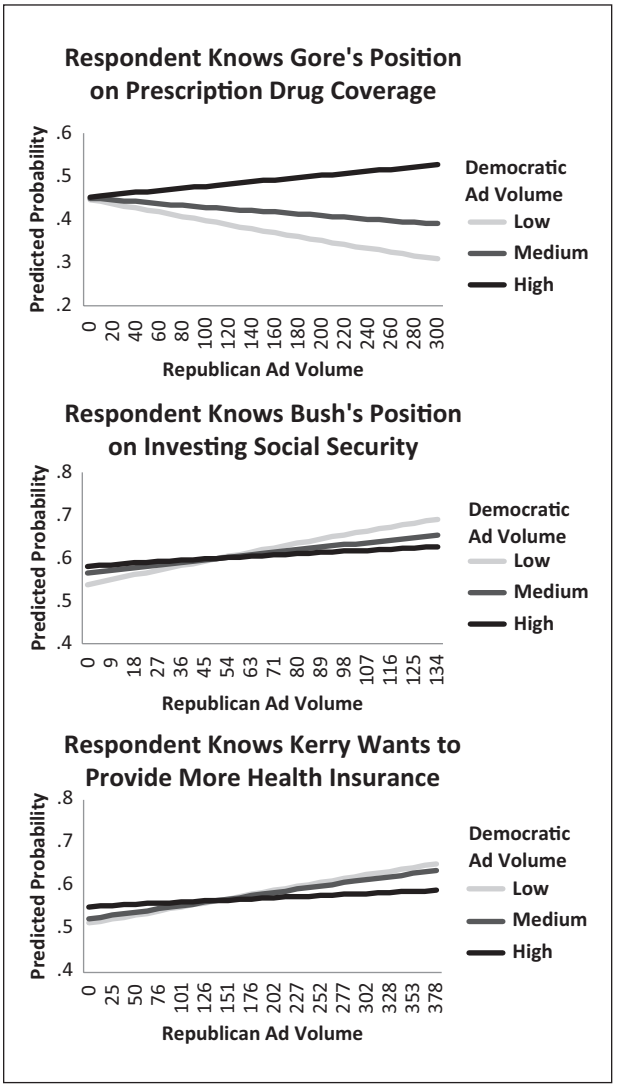

Figure 2. Effect of republican advertising on respondents with low interest at low, medium, and high levels of democratic advertising.
Source: 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Studies and the Wisconsin Advertising Project.
Predicted probabilities calculated using Clarify. The *x*-axis displays the number of ad airings in the previous week.

then, this case demonstrates that issue convergence can prevent harm and help voters make sense of candidates' positions.

Case 2: Investing Social Security in the Stock Market in 2000

The question of how to strengthen social security in the face of projected shortfalls due to an aging population was a major debate during the 2000 presidential campaign. Bush said his plan would ensure that people near or at the retirement age would receive their full benefits. At the same time, his plan allowed younger workers to divert a portion of the money that would normally go toward payroll taxes into individual accounts for investing in stocks and bonds. Gore's plan, in contrast, involved paying down the deficit by 2012 and funneling the interest saved into social security. In addition, he proposed that the government provide younger workers matching funds to encourage them to set money aside for retirement.

In their ads, Bush stayed positive, promoting his plan, while Gore avoided discussing his and focused on criticizing his opponent's. Bush relied on three ads. The first—aired more than 8,000 times during the campaign—explained,

> Bush's plan strengthens Social Security. It guarantees everyone at or near retirement every dollar of their benefits. No cut in Social Security. And the Bush plan gives younger workers a choice to put their Social Security in sound investments they control for higher returns.

The other two Bush ads were 30- and 60-second versions of the same ad, which emphasized Bush's theme of encouraging "personal responsibility" and trusting the people rather than government. In these ads, which were aired a combined total of more than 10,000 times, Bush said, "I trust you to invest some of your own social security money for higher returns." Bush's ads offered no specifics about the Gore plan.

In contrast, Gore relied on five different negative ads to make his case to voters. All of his ads claimed that Bush's plan would wreck the social security system because he would use money to create investment accounts for younger workers that should be used to pay benefits for current retirees. For example, the Gore ad aired most often (more than 3,700 times) said of Bush, "He's promising to take a trillion dollars out of social security so younger workers can invest in private accounts. Sounds good. The problem is that Bush has promised the same money to pay seniors their current benefits." Similarly, Gore's second most aired ad (2,900 times) claims "Bush promises the same $1 trillion of social security to younger workers and the elderly at the same time." The remaining three ads used similar language to criticize Bush's plan.

The six models in Table 1 for the second case estimate the effects of Democratic and Republican ads on the ability of respondents to correctly identify Bush and Gore's positions on allowing workers to invest a portion of their social security in the stock market. As in the previous analysis, the first three models examine the ability of respondents to identify Bush's position, and the last three models examine the ability of respondents to examine Gore's position. In the first model, we see that although the coefficient for Democratic ads (.12) is positive, it is statistically insignificant. The coefficient for Republican ads, however, is large, positive, and highly significant (.46, $p < .01$). What is odd is that the coefficient for the interaction term is negative and moderately large (−.21, *ns*). In Models 2 and 3, I examine whether these effects hold among political sophisticates or novices. They reveal that the positive and significant effect of Republican ads hold only for the latter (.51, $p < .01$). Yet, we also see in this model that the magnitude of the negative effect is even larger (−.35, *ns*). What this suggests is that a high level of Democratic advertising wipes out the positive effect of Republican advertising for political novices. The second panel in Figure 2 illustrates this effect. The light gray line with a steeper slope shows how the predicted probability of correctly identifying Bush's position changes with an increase of Republican advertising in the absence of Democratic advertising. The change is positive and significant. As Democratic advertising increases to the 50th percentile (around forty-five ads in the previous week), the slope of the Republican line becomes less steep. In fact, the change in the predicted probability as Republican advertising increases is no longer significant. At the 90th percentile of Democratic advertising (one hundred ad airings), the effect of Republican advertising disappears almost entirely. In the case of social security advertising, then, issue convergence does not appear to be enlightening and in fact appears to confuse less politically sophisticated respondents.

If we examine Models 4, 5, and 6, we see that neither the Democratic nor Republican ads have an effect on knowledge of Gore's position. This is not surprising in light of the fact that neither of the candidates' advertising discussed Gore's position. The question is why Gore's ads confuse respondents about Bush's position if his ads did in fact mention that Bush wanted to take money "out of Social Security so younger workers can invest in private accounts." One would think such ads would help voters identify Bush's position. The positive coefficients for Democratic advertising in Models 1 and 3 suggest that Gore's ads in the absence of Bush's ads were certainly more likely to help than harm respondent knowledge.

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that Gore's ads muddy the clarity of Bush's message by claiming that the Republican candidate "has promised the same money to pay seniors their current benefits" that he has promised to young workers. Gore was trying to argue that Bush's math was fuzzy, but his argument may have simply been too complicated for unsophisticated voters.

Case 3: Health Insurance in 2004

There was a striking contrast in the nature and scope of the health care plans offered by George Bush and John Kerry in 2004. Bush's more modest plan provided tax breaks to low- and moderate-income families to help them buy health insurance or to encourage them to set aside money in health savings accounts to pay for medical bills. He proposed the expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and Medicaid to cover uninsured children, as well as an expansion of federally funded health centers and clinics, particularly in under-served rural areas. Bush also proposed limiting malpractice lawsuits to bring down the cost of health care and insurance premiums, and the creation of insurance pools to lower the cost of health insurance for small businesses. He said his plan would cost $70 billion and would benefit 4.5 million Americans.

In contrast, Kerry offered a massive $650 billion plan that aimed to provide health insurance for all uninsured children and most uninsured adults. It offered subsidies to small businesses to offer health insurance, as well as subsidies to low-income people to help them buy insurance. In addition, he proposed a vast expansion of Medicaid and SCHIP. He also proposed that the federal government would pick up 75 percent of the cost of the most expensive medical cases—those more than $50,000 a year—if employers guaranteed that they would pass the savings along to their workers by reducing premiums. Kerry claimed his plan would help twenty-six million Americans get health insurance.

The information contained in Bush and Kerry's ads did have the potential to educate voters, but some of the ads were misleading. Most of the ads Bush aired about health care were negative, but the few that discussed his own plan did offer some specifics. Two of the ads, which were aired a combined total of more than 13,000 times, claimed his plan would "allow small businesses to band together, to get insurance rates big companies get" and said he would "stop" frivolous lawsuits. In addition, one of these ads also mentioned that he would offer "tax-free health savings accounts families own." The ad also claimed his plan would "keep doctors in their communities" and ensure that "every eligible child" would have health coverage. The two Kerry ads that discussed Bush's approach to health care tended to focus on his record rather than his plan, claiming that five million Americans had lost their health insurance during his first term in office and that Medicare premiums had increased by 17 percent. Another ad of Kerry's that was aired almost 10,000 times during the fall campaign, described the nature of rising health care costs and featured a woman who simply said, "I just think President Bush has no plan to deal with this."

Kerry's ads tended to emphasize his belief that health care should be a right for all citizens. The ad he aired most on the topic (almost 14,000 times) said, "In the richest country on the face of the planet no American ought to be struggling to have healthcare, it ought to be a right that we make accessible to and affordable to every single American." His ads tended to be short on specifics, however. One Democratic National Committee (DNC) ad said that Kerry's plan included "tax credits to help small businesses provide health insurance" and reimbursed employers for catastrophic costs. Instead of hearing from Kerry about the specifics of his plan, citizens heard from George Bush and the RNC who aired five different ads that were shown a combined total of more than 20,000 times, which characterized Kerry's plan as "a big government takeover." Two of these ads claimed Kerry's plan would result in "rationing, less access, fewer choices, long waits." Another said the plan includes "the IRS, Treasury Department, and several massive, new government agencies." In addition, Bush and the RNC aired two ads that said Kerry and "liberals in Congress" had blocked medical lawsuit reform ten times. Kerry tried to respond to Bush's barrage of negative ads with one that said, "George Bush's health care attack against John Kerry: not true. The Kerry plan gives doctors and patients the power to make medical decisions, not insurance company bureaucrats," but that ad aired only 2,400 times.

Models 1, 2, and 3 for the third case in Table 1 assess the impact of Democratic and Republican ads on respondents' ability to identify which candidate favored a "health insurance plan that would do both of the following—help to pay for health insurance for all children and help employers pay the cost of the workers' health insurance." Despite the fact that Kerry's ads explicitly stated that health care "ought to be a right that we make accessible to and affordable to every single American," his ads had no impact on the ability of respondents to identify him as the candidate who supported the above position. Strangely enough, Bush's ads helped respondents, especially those with less interest in government to answer the question correctly. The positive coefficient for Republican ads in Model 1 (.11, $p < .01$) disappears in Model 2 for political sophisticates, but reemerges in Model 3 (.15, $p < .01$). Evidently, the Republican ad claim that Kerry's plan involved "a big government takeover" was more effective at communicating the gist of Kerry's position to the

unsophisticated than Kerry's lofty discussion of universal rights. Although the coefficients for both Democratic and Republican ads in Model 3 are positive, the coefficient for the interaction term is negative (−.07) and just misses statistical significance. As with the case of social security in 2000, this finding suggests that dialogue may be confusing for political novices. The third panel in Figure 2 illustrates this effect using predicted probabilities. The steepest line shows the effect of Republican ads in the absence of Democratic ads. The middle line shows the effect of Republican ads with moderate number of Democratic ads, while the lower (darkest) line shows the effect of a high level of Democratic ads. Republican ads cease to have a statistically significant effect on respondent knowledge when Democratic ads reach the 90th percentile (approximately 125 ad airings in the previous week).

Both the Republican and Democratic ads focused on Kerry's plan, each characterizing it in different ways. Oddly enough, Kerry failed to effectively communicate his approach allowing Bush to communicate it for him. When respondents with low political interest were confronted by a high volume of ads from both candidates, they found it difficult to extract usable information from it.

Discussion and Conclusion

A number of insights arise from this analysis. First, issue convergence happens. Just as others have argued, in each election cycle, certain issues emerge that are so important to voters that candidates find they ignore them at their peril.[15] Perhaps, more importantly, however, it seems to happen when one candidate begins to gain traction with voters on a particular issue and his opponent sees no option but to attack him. For instance, Bush tried to recast Gore's approach to expanding Medicare coverage as creating a "government-run HMO" and Kerry's plan to ensure that every child has health care as a "liberal," "big government takeover." This suggests that issue convergence and negativity may often be found together, especially in elections that are as competitive as presidential elections.

If it is true that issue convergence has unpredictable effects on citizens, then we need to consider what role it plays, if any, in a deliberative campaign. One could argue that deliberation itself is simply not all it is cracked up to be (see, for example, Mutz 2006). I would argue that such a conclusion would be premature since, as the discussion of deliberation above illustrates, issue convergence is an impoverished way to conceive of the concept. Part of the problem may be that campaigns and elections scholars have assumed that issue convergence is severable from other aspects of a deliberative electoral system. For example, instead of simply identifying moments of candidate issue convergence, perhaps scholars should also try to identify moments of engagement in which candidates provide clear reasons or justifications for their positions. They might also want to parse the tone of the engagement by asking whether the candidates are discussing the same issue in a civil manner. Another approach might be to ask whether issue convergence plays some as yet unidentified roles in a deliberative electoral system, despite the fact that it cannot be relied on to boost voter knowledge. For instance, consider the much-maligned negative television advertisement. Although some have argued that they demobilize certain groups of potential voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997) and contribute to party polarization in the electorate (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), many studies have also shown that these ads help people learn important information about candidates and their issues (Franz et al. 2007; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Lipsitz 2011). As a result, scholars recognize that negative advertising plays an important role in making the electoral system deliberative, even though its tone is often less than civil. One may be able to restore issue convergence's good name in a similar manner. Then again, issue convergence may be nothing more than issue convergence.

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Notes

1. For more comprehensive discussions of deliberation, see Dryzek 2010; Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Dryzek 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Fishkin 1991; Cohen 1997.
2. Other scholars have developed normative standards for evaluating campaigns, but do not necessarily describe their standards as "deliberative" (Bartels 2000; Kelley 1960).
3. The word dialogue has been used in many disciplines (e.g., philosophy, literary criticism, and communications) to refer

to Martin Buber's dialogic principle, "I–Thou" (1965). It requires qualities, such as "open-heartedness," "honesty," "nonmanipulative intent," and "love," among others (Johannesen 1971, 375). Thus, dialogue, in this sense, requires much more than simply talking about the same issue. For a fuller account, see Arnett, Grayson, and McDowell 2008; Cissna and Anderson 1994; Johannesen 1971.

4. Lipsitz defines deliberation in a multifaceted manner with "dialogue" being just one component of deliberation.
5. For a description of the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) and a discussion of how the format for the issue knowledge questions differed in 2000 and 2004, see online Appendix B.
6. Unfortunately, there is no way to validate a respondent's self-reported political engagement in the NAES. However, additional analyses indicate that the same differences found here between the politically engaged and unengaged also exist between those with a bachelors degree or higher and those without a bachelors degree, confirming that the ability of voters to process candidate issue convergence hinges on personal resources, such as education and political interest.
7. The three instances of issue convergence discussed here occurred on topics discussed widely by the campaigns and the media. As a result, those who were politically engaged stood to learn the least from ads on these topics, whether or not there was issue convergence.
8. If I code "don't know" respondents as missing, the results do not significantly change.
9. The question wording and coding information for all variables can be found in online Appendix A.
10. The full models can be found in the online appendix.
11. The linear combination of these coefficients, however, is not statistically significant due to the smaller sample sizes.
12. Predicted probability graphs were not included for Models 1 and 2 because the findings are weaker and they illustrate the same principle: that issue convergence can boost citizen knowledge and prevent harm.
13. Because it is theoretically interesting to understand the effect of Democratic ads when there are no Republican ads, the "low" line represents the absence of Republican ads. The moderate and high levels were based on the 50th (54 airings in the previous seven days) and 90th percentiles (174 ad airings) of Republican advertising when Democratic advertising was greater than zero.
14. To determine this, I used multinomial logit. The dependent variable had four categories representing the three possible choices and a "don't know" category.
15. Keep in mind that there could have been other instances of issue convergence about topics that were not mentioned on the NAES surveys.

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