# Responsiveness in a Polarized Era: How Local Economic Conditions Structure Campaign Rhetoric

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**Abstract**

Politics in the United States has become increasingly nationalized and polarized, raising the question: Are politicians responsive to the local concerns of their constituents? I investigate this question by examining how local economic conditions affect the expressed priorities of congressional candidates, drawing on the content of televised campaign advertisements between 2000 and 2016. Exploiting over-time changes in local unemployment rates, I find that the issue content of campaign ads varies substantially with local conditions. Specifically, candidates in high-unemployment areas devote more attention to jobs and employment and less to the safety net. Democrats also discuss business less in high-unemployment areas. The magnitude of the effects varies by party in a way consistent with theories of strategic emphasis. These findings suggest that, rather than politics being uniform throughout the country, candidates are responsive to the conditions in their districts — but this responsiveness depends in part on the national-level political environment. Economic geography therefore acts as a constraint on the nationalization of politics.

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Over the last several decades, politics in the United States has become increasingly nationalized. Driven by the decline of local news and the rise of polarization, politics across the country is defined in large part by issues that are salient at the national level (Hopkins, 2018). Voting patterns in Congress are increasingly polarized along partisan lines (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2016) and, at least in terms of voting, politicians are relatively unresponsive to constituency opinions (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001; Bafumi and Herron, 2010). These patterns challenge the fundamental assumption that politicians are elected to represent the interests of their constituency. Are voters simply failing to hold politicians accountable? Or is there another way that politicians are responsive to the conditions in their districts?

This question is made all the more pressing because the economic fate of the country is rapidly de-nationalizing. As employment has shifted to service-sector and "knowledge economy" industries, some regions are prospering while others languish — reversing a long-running trend toward economic convergence across the country (Ganong and Shoag, 2017; Berry and Glaeser, 2005). If differing economic conditions require different policy responses, political nationalization may hinder effective responses to the country's growing economic fragmentation.

In this paper, I argue that a focus on legislative voting obscures other ways that politicians can respond to constituency concerns. Politicians have wide latitude over the issue dimensions they focus on, both as candidates and as legislators. Even with identical voting records, two politicians could provide different representation by focusing their energies on different policy areas — potentially providing an alternative way for politicians to remain responsive to their constituents. I investigate the extent to which expressed issue priorities are, in fact, shaped by local demands. To measure issue focus empirically, I use data on the content of televised campaign advertisements run by House candidates between 2000 and 2016. I pair these with data on local unemployment rates, as an indicator of the state of the economy. I then use fixed effects regressions that exploit changes in unemployment to

estimate the effect of local economic conditions on the expressed priorities of candidates.

I find strong evidence of responsiveness to the local economy, and partisan heterogeneity that is consistent with theories of strategic issue emphasis. When local unemployment rises, candidates focus on jobs in a larger share of their campaign ads — providing evidence that the local economy influences the issue substance of political campaigns. This responsiveness is especially strong among candidates who do not belong to the president's party, consistent with voters holding the president's party accountable for the state of the economy (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2019). If candidates try to set the agenda of the campaign through their advertisements, members of the president's party should attempt to deflect attention away from the economy during downturns (Vavreck, 2009).

The share of ads discussing two other broad issue areas related to economic policy — the safety net and the business environment — is also related to the performance of the local economy. All candidates focus on safety net policies less, on average, in response to rising unemployment, but this decline is particularly pronounced amongst Republicans, who are generally less supportive of transfers to the unemployed. Similarly, Democrats avoid discussing the business environment in response to rising unemployment. These heterogeneous effects are consistent with models of strategic issue emphasis, whereby candidates compete to frame problems in terms of policies on which their party is viewed as more competent (Petrocik, 1996).

Finally, I show that the degree of responsiveness — by both parties — does not depend on the level of electoral competitiveness within a region. Regardless of ex ante competitiveness, candidates respond to unemployment in the same way across the country.

Taken together, the results show that there is substantial heterogeneity across the country in terms of the issue substance of politics. A strong version of the nationalization hypothesis would suggest that political contests look similar across the country — with relatively homogeneous sets of Democrats and Republicans competing over nationally salient issues. Instead, I document that the way candidates portray themselves to voters varies significantly

— both within and across party — in response to economic circumstances faced by voters in their districts.

How can these findings be reconciled with prior research claiming minimal responsiveness? Most research into political responsiveness has focused on ideological positioning — often coming to the conclusion that politicians are generally more extreme than their constituents and not very responsive to district ideology (Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001; Fowler and Hall, 2016; Bafumi and Herron, 2010). But ideology is only one facet of representation. Politicians have many choices to make in terms of the issues they prioritize and the style of representation they provide their constituents (Grimmer, 2013*b*). Candidates use campaign advertisements to signal to voters the issues they will focus on if elected and to signal their values (Sulkin, 2009; Sulkin and Swigger, 2008). Campaign rhetoric therefore plays an important role in helping voters select the candidate who will best represent them — not just in terms of roll-call votes, but also in terms of the issues they prioritize.

This study also sheds new light on how the economy influences elections. Following theories of retrospective voting, a wealth of research finds that economic circumstances affect support for the incumbent party (e.g. Fiorina, 1981; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Healy, Persson and Snowberg, 2017; Margalit, 2011). Rather than solely influencing re-election rates or the identity of the candidate who is elected, the economy also affects the issues that are salient in politics and policy dimensions that candidates focus on.

Finally, these results contribute to the literature on political campaigns. A large theoretical and empirical literature has developed explaining campaign strategy.[1] I contribute to this literature in two ways. First, I show how policy stances and partisan reputations interact with the local electoral environment to shape campaign strategy. Second, my use of congressional campaign data provides a methodological improvement in the ability to infer the causal effects of the economy on campaign strategy. Research on presidential elections is limited by small sample sizes and limited variation in economic conditions — making it

[1]For example, see Riker (1986); Vavreck (2009); Petrocik (1996); Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen (2003); Dragu and Fan (2016); and Druckman, Jacobs and Ostermeier (2004).

difficult to control for confounding variables. By focusing on congressional campaigns, I can employ panel data methods that account for several types of omitted variables bias, leading to stronger claims of causality.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I review work on political nationalization and economic divergence. Then, I outline three contrasting theoretical perspectives on how the local economy could influence campaign rhetoric. Then, I introduce the data and analytic strategy I employ. Next, I present the main empirical results along with an extension. Finally, I conclude.

# 1 Political Convergence, Economic Divergence

This paper is motivated in part by two contradictory trends in the political and economic worlds over the past half-century: the nationalization of politics, on the one hand, and the de-nationalization of the economy, on the other. To situate the paper in the literature, I first briefly describe research on these topics.

One of the defining features of the modern political era is polarization between Democrats and Republicans (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2016). Starting around the 1970s, the ideological distance between Democrats and Republicans in Congress has increased substantially, while the variance in voting patterns within has declined. Researchers have long noted that partisanship, rather than constituency characteristics, tends to dominate congressional voting (Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001; Fowler and Hall, 2016).

Similarly, political behavior also appears to be nationalizing. Sprung on in part by Southern Realignment, voters are increasingly sorted into the "correct" party based on their ideological leanings, leaving a dearth of liberal Republicans or conservative Democrats (Levendusky, 2009). At the same time, there has been a shift in the way citizens process politics, away from local concerns and towards national issues (Hopkins, 2018). Voters are less fa-

miliar with the personal characteristics of their representatives, and candidates try to link themselves to issues of national import.

Congressional election results reflect this trend of nationalization. Since the early 1990s, the rate at which incumbents are re-elected has declined, mirroring an uptick in straight-ticket voting and the emergence of the president as a focal point in congressional elections (Jacobson, 2015). Overall, the picture that emerges from this research is that politics is a battle between relatively homogeneous sets of Democrats and Republicans — leaving local differences with little explanatory role to play.[2]

Yet, curiously, this trend has occurred over precisely the period when the economic fate of the country is de-nationalizing (Moretti, 2012). Throughout most of American history, regions with less prosperous economies were growing faster than those with more prosperous economies, leading to a convergence in opportunity and income across the country. However, beginning in the 1980s, this trend stalled and even reversed (Barro and Sala-i Martin, 1992; Berry and Glaeser, 2005). Instead of equalization across regions, the modern knowledge economy is characterized by winning regions — mostly metropolises on the coast in the Sunbelt — and declining regions — rural areas throughout the country and postindustrial cities in the Midwest. Declining regions now experience persistent joblessness (Amior and Manning, 2018), and a number of frictions prevent people in less-prosperous regions from benefiting from macro-level gains brought about by increased globalization and technological progress (Ganong and Shoag, 2017; Autor, Dorn and Hanson, 2013; Giannone, 2016).

These dual trends are surprising given the well-documented role of the economy in congressional elections. It has long been observed that incumbents — whether they be presidents, senators, or members of Congress — are re-elected at a higher rate when macroeconomic conditions are good (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). This pattern can be explained by retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981; Ferejohn, 1986). In gubernatorial elections, researchers have demonstrated links between incumbent success and both the unemployment

[2]Of course, there are exceptions to this story, especially when it comes to issues that are primarily or exclusively the domain of sub-national government (Thompson, 2019; Jensen et al., 2020).

rate (Ebeid and Rodden, 2006) and tax burdens (Besley and Case, 1995).[3] More recently, de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2019) examine county-level unemployment rates and election results at a number of levels of government. They find that candidates from the president's party experience a small but consistent penalty for higher unemployment in national, state, and local races.[4]

Given this well-documented link between the economy and election outcomes, it is surprising that the emerging wisdom is that local conditions matter little for the way that members of Congress represent their constituents. One reason for this view is the overwhelming focus in studies of representation on roll-call voting (e.g., Miller and Stokes, 1963; Bafumi and Herron, 2010). While easily observable and undoubtedly important, roll call votes are only one part of the representation that members of Congress provide for their constituents. Members of Congress also develop reputations for specializing in particular policy areas, for example by serving in relevant committees and authoring legislation. This specialization in Congress often reflect constituents' policy needs (Adler and Lapinski, 1997). The one-dimensional nature of congressional voting obscures these important facets of representation in Congress.

Additionally, another important linkage between representatives and their constituents is in the way that politicians explain their activities. Politicians use press releases, direct communication with constituents, interviews, and advertisements to shape the way that constituents view them and the work they do in Congress (Grimmer, 2013*b*; Grose, Malhotra and Van Houweling, 2015). Far from being epiphenomenal to representation, these expressed priorities define a core way that citizens understand and interact with their representative in government (Fenno, 1978).

[3]Ebeid and Rodden (2006) find conditional effects of the economy on gubernatorial election outcomes. Namely, governors appear to be held accountable in states that have diversified economies, where policy has a stronger impact on economic outcomes. In less diversified economies, economic conditions tend to be dominated by fluctuations in national or global markets that are exogenous to state-level policy, and governors do not appear to be held accountable for economic conditions.

[4]A smaller literature estimates the effects of trade exposure on politics, often using the "China" shock. Generally, these studies suggest that trade exposure causes legislators to vote in a more protectionist manner (Feigenbaum and Hall, 2015), may contribute to political polarization (Autor et al., 2017), and reduces support for the incumbent party (Margalit, 2011; Jensen, Quinn and Weymouth, 2017). Citizens in trade-exposed areas may also adopts more authoritarian values (Ballard-Rosa, Scheve and Jensen, 2019).

My work contributes to these literatures by showing how economic geography shapes political communication and the content of politics — even in an era that is characterized by a high degree of polarization. Moving beyond election outcomes, I show how candidates strategically shape their campaign messaging to portray themselves as responsive to constituent concerns.

# 2 Campaign Rhetoric and Local Conditions: Theoretical Frames

This paper studies the relationship between local economic conditions and campaign rhetoric, as measured by televised ads. Before outlining hypotheses about this relationship, it is worth addressing why campaign advertisements are an important outcome to study in the first place.

First, televised campaign ads are ubiquitous and becoming more common, even in the digital era. In the 2018 midterm elections, House candidates aired over 1.2 million ads in total — roughly doubling the number of ads aired compared to the prior midterm election (Fowler, Franz and Ridout, 2018).[5] Second, campaign advertisements stimulate interest in politics more generally. After viewing a televised campaign ad, viewers increase the amount of political news they consume (Canen and Martin, 2019). Campaign ads thus play an important role in informing voters and the content of the ads is likely to frame the way voters understand politics. Third, campaign advertisements also carry a fairly large deal of substantive content. They legislative priorities and predict candidates' subsequent activity in Congress (Sulkin, 2009; Sulkin and Swigger, 2008), set the agenda for the campaign (Sellers, 1998), and differentiate candidates from each other (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). Fourth, political ads may be able to persuade and inform voters, giving citizens cues

[5]These numbers refer to both primary and general election advertisements. In my analyses, I subset to ads run in the general election.

about which policies are likely to benefit them (Lenz, 2013; Gabel and Scheve, 2007). Finally, with the decline of local newspapers and as politicians seek ways to communicate directly with voters, political advertisements likely make up an increasing share of the information voters have about candidates.

In sum, campaign advertisements play an important role in the broader political ecosystem. The content of the campaigns reveals significant information and may frame citizens' understanding of politics. If the content of campaigns is unresponsive to local concerns, it may accelerate polarization and nationalization of politics, and could contribute to political cynicism amongst citizens.

To investigate campaign responsiveness empirically, I focus on rhetoric surrounding the economy and economic policy. Narrowing my focus to these issues provides analytical traction — both because objective measures of local economic conditions are available and because there is a clear theoretical link between the state of the economy and government policy. In particular, I examine discussion of jobs, the safety net, and the business environment. Rhetoric about jobs primarily serves to highlight the state of the economy and underscore a candidate's commitment to pursuing policies that will mitigate the pain from lost jobs. The other two topics are classes of policies to accomplish that goal.

How should we expect local economic conditions to affect the tenor of campaigns? Drawing on work in political communication and political economy, I outline three contrasting sets of hypotheses: minimal responsiveness, uniform responsiveness, and conditional responsiveness. They each make contrasting predictions about which candidates should emphasize which issues. I then apply these theories to the case of economic policy to generate specific expectations for responsiveness to local economic conditions.

The first hypothesis, *minimal responsiveness*, suggests that there should be little relationship between local economic conditions and campaign rhetoric. According to the nationalization hypothesis discussed above, politicians across the country appear to be focusing on issues of national import rather than local concern and the public appears to be increasingly

attached to their partisan identity (Jacobson, 2015; Hopkins, 2018). Additionally, with the decline of local news, citizens may simply be less informed about how the economy in their area is performing relative to the nation as a whole. These factors together suggest that the rewards for tailoring campaigns to local economic conditions may be relatively small compared to an alternative approach of emphasizing policy issues that are central to national party conflict. The hypothesis generated from this perspective is that the condition of the local economy should not be correlated with campaign issue emphasis, after accounting for national-level trends.

The second hypothesis, *uniform responsiveness*, suggests that all politicians should respond in a uniform way to variation in local economic conditions. In this story, politicians simply aim to appeal to constituents' pre-determined policy priorities, which may be shaped by local economic conditions. This logic is analogous to the idea that candidates should converge to the median voter in a spatial model of elections (Downs, 1957).

This perspective implies that we should observe responsiveness to local conditions, and that the magnitude of this responsiveness should be roughly similar across candidates. Increased unemployment may make all three topics I examine — jobs, safety net policy, and the business environment — more salient. Thus, ex ante, I expect an increase in the prevalence of these topics in campaign ads.

The third hypothesis, *conditional responsiveness*, suggests that there should be responsiveness to local economic conditions, but the content of the response will depend on candidates' identities. There are two dimensions on which I consider heterogeneity: incumbency and partisanship.

Incumbency is important for determining voters' attribution of credit and blame for the economy (Fiorina, 1981). Recent research suggests that control of the presidency is especially important. Down-ballot candidates from the president's party are punished electorally when unemployment rises (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2019). Candidates from the president's party may therefore try to minimize the importance of the economy as a cam-

paign issue during downturns and emphasize it when it is performing well (Vavreck, 2009). Out-party candidates have opposing incentives.

Another dimension on which responsiveness may vary is partisanship. Democrats and Republicans generally seek to implement different policies in mitigating the effects of economic downturns. Democrats may turn to safety net policies such as unemployment insurance and welfare for those experiencing poverty. Republicans, by contrast, tend to focus more on policies that promote private investment and employment. These policy reputations likely shape the particular dimensions that candidates emphasize in their campaign rhetoric — with politicians competing to frame solutions to economic downturns in terms of policy areas where their party is seen as more competent (cf. Petrocik, 1996).

The testable hypotheses associated with this discussion vary according to the issue considered. As noted above, ads that highlight jobs often serve to underscore the importance of the economy in the campaign, rather than propose particular policies. I therefore expect the presidential incumbency logic to apply most strongly to discussion of jobs, with candidates from the president's party de-emphasizing jobs as a campaign issue in response to rising unemployment, and vice versa for out-party candidates.

Because Democrats can more credibly claim that they want to provide expanded safety net protections in response to rising unemployment, I expect that Democrats will seek to increase the salience of this policy dimension in their ads. Republicans, by contrast, will seek to avoid discussion of the safety net.

Finally, I expect the opposite pattern to hold for discussion of the business environment. Republicans are typically seen as the party of business and may seek to emphasize this reputation. In contrast, Democrats may seek to downplay the business environment, favoring other responses instead.

To recap, I outline three contrasting perspectives on how the local economy may affect the rhetoric used by candidates running for Congress. The minimal responsiveness perspective suggests that local economic conditions are unlikely to be important. The uniform

responsiveness perspective suggests that all candidates should respond in similar ways to local economic conditions. Finally, the conditional responsiveness perspective emphasizes heterogeneous responses depending on the party and incumbency of the candidate. In the next section, I describe the data sources I use to adjudicate between these explanations.

# 3 Data

To understand the impact of local economic conditions on campaign rhetoric, I draw on a dataset of television advertisements, merged with data on local employment conditions. In this section, I describe the various data sources I use. I begin by describing the geographic units to which I aggregate data — which are determined by the way that television ad buys work. I then describe the campaign ad data and the economic variables in turn.

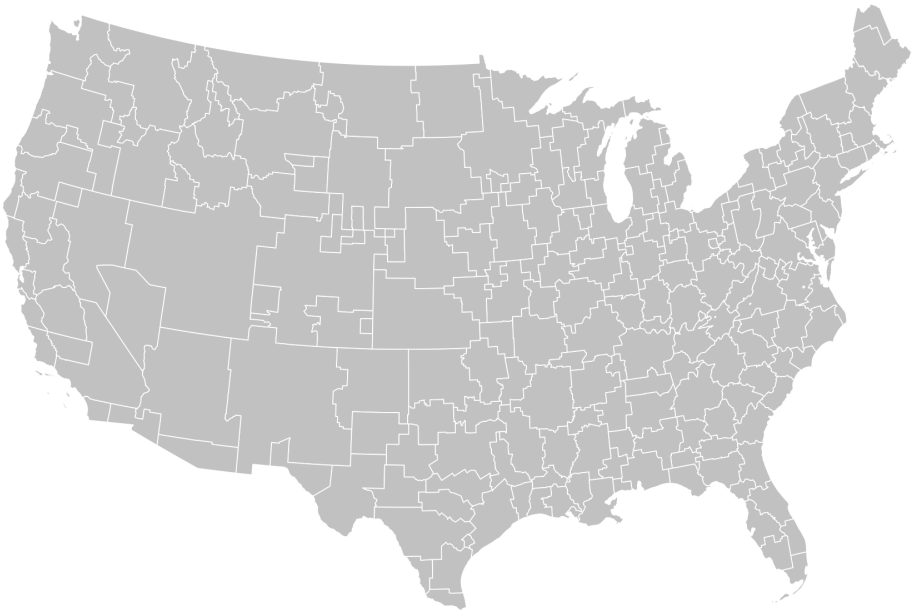
## 3.1 Geographic Unit of Analysis

The geographic unit of analysis throughout the rest of the paper is the media market — which is the level at which most TV ad buys occur. There are 210 media markets, defined by the market research firm Neilsen, that collectively cover the entire United States. Media markets consist of a central city and the surrounding area, with most counties belonging to a single media market. They typically encompass a number of congressional districts. I use a county-media market crosswalk to aggregate county-level economic variables to the media markets in which ads are run.[6] The advertising data, described below, includes the media market in which an ad is aired. Figure 1 shows geographic boundaries of media markets.

Media markets are a useful geography for studying local economic conditions. Because many people commute outside of their home county or congressional district for work, they are not very suitable for studying local economic phenomena. Media markets, on the other hand, are a collection of nearby counties and thus may more closely track a local labor

[6]The crosswalk is based on Gaurav Sood's crosswalk available at `https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IVXEHT`.

**Figure 1:** Map of Media Market Boundaries



market. In that way, they are somewhat similar to commuting zones — a geographic unit defined by contiguous counties that is commonly employed in research about local economies — though media markets are significantly larger.

## 3.2 Campaign Advertisements

The outcome variables are derived from televised campaign advertisements run by candidates for Congress from 2000 through 2016. Even with the rise of the internet and digital media, television still plays a dominant role in political campaigns. As of 2015, over 85% of American adults watched television.[7] During the 2016 election season, candidates spent over $2.8 billion on television ads across all races.

The data I employ are drawn from the Wisconsin Ads Project for 2000-2004 and 2008 (Goldstein et al., 2011) and the Wesleyan Media Project for 2006 and 2010-2016 (Fowler, Franz and Ridout, 2016). These research groups host data originally collected by the Kantar Media CMAG, a market research firm that continuously monitors network television sta-

[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/upshot/why-television-is-still-king-for-campaign-spending.html

**Table 1:** Summary of Advertising Sample by Year

| Year | # markets | # districts | # ads run |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2000 | 73 | 141 | 120,372 |
| 2002 | 87 | 145 | 150,366 |
| 2004 | 92 | 155 | 142,774 |
| 2006 | 95 | 176 | 239,390 |
| 2008 | 164 | 192 | 317,255 |
| 2010 | 170 | 216 | 423,655 |
| 2012 | 161 | 197 | 337,122 |
| 2014 | 152 | 155 | 282,576 |
| 2016 | 135 | 147 | 283,796 |

tions throughout the country to collect data on advertising. CMAG uses technology that automatically records every instance of an ad being run, enabling identification of unique and duplicate ads.

There are 194 unique media markets in my full sample of ads, but not all markets are represented each year. In 2000, CMAG monitored the 75 largest media markets, which contain approximately 80% of the U.S. population. From 2002-2006, the largest 100 media markets were monitored. From 2008 onward, every media market was monitored. However, even in later years, not all media markets saw TV ads by congressional candidates.

I exclude ads run before the primary in a given state and ads that are run by outside groups. I also exclude Alaska and Hawaii because of the unique economic circumstances caused by their isolation from the rest of the United States.

The final sample includes 2,297,306 ads played over 9 election cycles. Table 1 summarizes the sample size in terms of number of media markets, congressional districts, and advertisements run in each cycle.

The content of each ad was coded by researchers at WiscAds and WMP on a range of variables. I focus on three topics in particular that are related to the economy: *Jobs and Employment*, the *Business Environment*, and the *Safety Net*.[8] These topics were selected because there are clear links between the local economy and the salience of these topics for

[8]In the Appendix, I also consider discussion of fiscal policy — i.e., taxes, spending, and recessions.

voters.[9] Given the large number of topics that candidates could discuss, focusing on issues with clear theoretical relevance aids interpretation and preserves parsimony in the analysis.

*Jobs and Employment* is an issue coded directly by WiscAds/WMP. To create the other two measures, I aggregate several lower-level issues.[10] Namely, ads are coded as discussing the business environment if they mention business, unions, or the minimum wage. Ads are coded as discussing safety net policies if they discuss Medicare, Social Security, welfare, poverty, the Affordable Care Act, or seniors. And ads are coded as discussing fiscal policy if they discuss taxes, government spending, the deficit, or recessions. Additionally, I also employ coding of the ad tone — namely, whether the ad is designed to promote the candidate running the ad, attack the opponent, or contrast the candidates.

Aggregating in this way has several advantages. First, the specific policies relevant to these broad categories vary over time. For example, a major debate during the Bush administration was over privatization of Social Security. By the Obama era, debate over the safety net had shifted to other policies, namely health care. Second, in line with changing policy debates, the specific categories coded by WiscAds/WMP varies slightly over time. By aggregating, I improve over-time comparability. Third, some of the specific issues are closely related or overlap substantially. Aggregation therefore increases parsimony of the analyses — especially given that the typical 30-second TV ad does not go into great detail on specific policies.

To create my main set of outcome variables, I collapse the data to the candidate-media market level, so that each observation is the average proportion of ads a candidate runs in a given media market that mention a specific issue.[11] This operationalization is not

[9]There is also empirical evidence linking them, at least at the individual level. For example, Margalit (2013) documents that workers who lost their jobs during the Great Recession expressed higher support for safety net policies, at least in the short term.

[10]While any coding project will inevitably mislabel some observations, coding reliability statistics for the variables I use are generally high, with Cohen's $\kappa$ and Kripendorff's $\alpha$ values above 0.8 for most variables. See WMP documentation for details. Additionally, aggregating multiple similar categories is likely to increase reliability as well.

[11]Most candidates only run ads in a single media market. However, when a congressional district spans multiple media markets, the same candidate can appear in multiple observation.

affected by how many advertisement a candidate runs. This choice is appropriate because the theory refers to candidates' strategies as a whole, rather than the content of individual advertisements.

Formally, let $i$ index candidates, $t$ index election cycles, and $m$ index media markets. Each candidate purchases $J_{imt}$ ads, which varies across candidates, media markets, and election cycles. When the same ad is aired multiple times, each independent airing is counts towards $J_{imt}$. Suppose $y_{imtj}$ is an indicator whether a specific ad mentions a given issue. I take the average within candidate-market-cycle, as follows:

$$\bar{y}_{imt} = \frac{1}{J_{imt}} \sum_{j=1}^{J_{imt}} y_{imtj}. \tag{1}$$

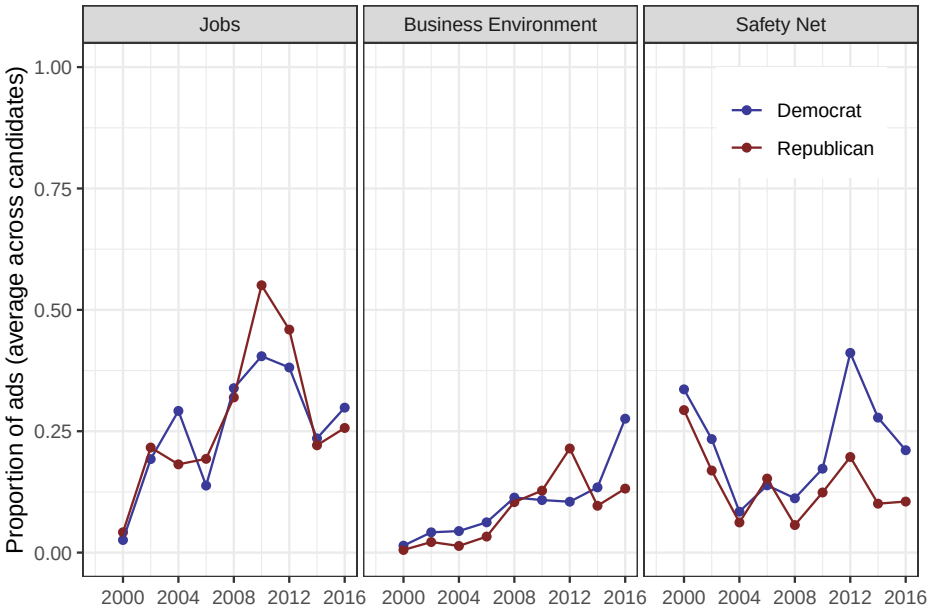
Figure 2 shows the over-time trends of advertising content by party. There are significant spikes in advertisements about jobs around the time of the Great Recession. In 2010, the average candidate mentioned jobs in about 50% of the ads they ran. Similarly, there is a spike in discussion of safety net policies in 2012, especially among Democrats — likely driven by ads mentioning the Affordable Care Act. Discussion of the business environment steadily became more prevalent over the study period.

While this plot provides some initial clues about how the political salience of issues has changed over time, a key question addressed by the rest of the paper is the extent to which these trends are driven by national-level factors versus local factors.

## 3.3 Local Economic Variables

My primary measure of local economic conditions is the unemployment rate within a media market, derived from the BLS's Local Area Unemployment program, which provides counts of the number of people within each county who employed and unemployed. The unemployment rate is a salient proxy for the economic well-being of a region — and one that is extensively covered by news media (Garz and Martin, 2020). The effects of unemployment are not

**Figure 2:** Distribution of Issues in Campaign Ads for House Candidates, 2000-2016



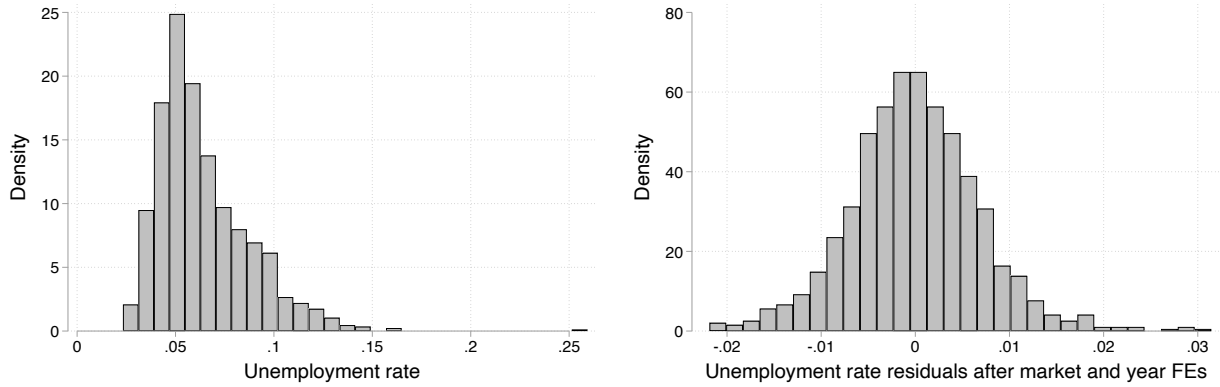

*Notes*: All candidates are weighted equally, regardless of the number of ads they ran in a given year.

limited to the unemployed, but also reverberate around the community, both in the form of social despair and via macroeconomic effects of decreased household spending. Additionally, news of job losses spreads through social networks, thereby influencing citizens' perceptions of the economy (Alt et al., 2020; Ansolabehere, Meredith and Snowberg, 2014).

The explanatory variables are averaged over each two year congressional election cycle. For example, for candidates airing ads in the Cleveland media market in 2016, the explanatory variables is the unemployment rate in Cleveland averaged over 2015-16.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the unemployment rate measure. The left-hand panel shows a histogram of the unemployment rate across media markets from 2000-2016, averaged over 2-year election cycles. The right-hand panel shows the distribution of unemployment after removing media market and year fixed effects — essentially plotting the within-market variation.

**Figure 3:** Distribution of Unemployment Rate Across and Within Media Markets




*Notes*: The left panel shows the distribution of unemployment rate, averaged over 2-year campaign cycles, across media markets from 2000-2016. The standard deviation is 0.023. The right hand panel plots the distribution of unemployment within media markets — i.e., after purging market and year fixed effects. The standard deviation of this residualized measure is 0.007.

# 4 Analysis Strategy

I am interested in both descriptive and causal questions about the relationship between campaign rhetoric and local economic conditions. To that end, I present both bivariate correlations and a series of fixed-effects regressions. The bivariate results are useful for understanding descriptively how campaign rhetoric differs across the country. However, simple correlations may be driven either by a real relationship between the economic conditions and campaign rhetoric or by other unobserved variables. To control for some types of confounding, I estimate regressions that includes fixed effects for the campaign cycle, the state, and the media market. These fixed effects help to eliminate the potential for confounding by exploiting variation within election cycles, within states, and/or within media markets over time.

Political rhetoric may not instantaneously adjust to changes in local economic conditions — both because of a delay in learning and because any effect may be mediated by changes in who runs for office in the first place. Therefore, I report regressions that include both contemporaneous measures of local economic conditions and one-cycle lags.

Additionally, as outlined above, there is theoretical reason to the think that Democrats

and Republicans may respond differently to changes in local economic conditions. To investigate this possibility, I include interactions between the measures of economic conditions and the candidate's party.

Formally, consider observations indexed by candidate $i$ in media market $m$ in election cycle $t$. I estimate regressions with media market fixed effects and time fixed effects. The full regressions take the form:

$$y_{imt} = \beta^{p[i]}\text{Unemployment}_{mt} + \delta_1\text{Party}_i + \alpha_m + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it}. \tag{2}$$

In this equation, the key coefficients of interest are $\beta^{p[i]}$, which represent the partial effect of the unemployment rate for candidates of party $p[i]$.[12] Specifically, a one percentage point increase in the local unemployment rate is associated with a $\beta^p$ percentage point increase in the share of advertisements that mention a given issue among candidates from party $p$, on average. In most specifications, party is coded as Democrat or Republican. In some specifications, I instead code party as an indicator for whether the candidate belongs to the incumbent president's party. The terms $\alpha_m$ and $\gamma_t$ are media market and election-cycle fixed effects, respectively. $\varepsilon_{it}$ is a mean-zero error term. Because unemployment rate is measured at the media market level, I cluster the standard errors by media market (Abadie et al., 2017).

The coefficients on unemployment have a causal interpretation under the assumption that the error term is uncorrelated with unemployment. The inclusion of geographic and time fixed effects helps to increase the plausibility of this assumption, as they remove variation that is solely due to persistent differences across locations and variation that is due to the time period. I assess sensitivity to the exact source of variation used by presenting results from several sets of fixed-effects regressions.

[12]Note that this specification is numerically identical to the more traditional interaction specification, where the continuous variable is interacted with a dummy variable. I present results in this format because it draws attention to the effect of unemployment for candidates of each party, rather than the difference in this effect.

I operationalize a test of the conditional responsiveness theory by comparing the $\beta$ coefficients across parties via an $F$-test. The conditional responsiveness perspective outlined above suggests that the effect of unemployment rate on campaign rhetoric should depend on features of the candidate, such as party. While this theory suggests that candidates will downplay issues on which they are at a disadvantage, it does not necessarily follow that we should expect opposite signs on the coefficients. For one, candidates may have to respond to their opponents' messaging, so a candidate who would like to avoid discussion of the economy, for example, may nonetheless be baited into discussing it by their opponent. Constituent demand, too, may force candidates to discuss unfavorable issues. Thus, I focus on whether the responses are stronger for one party versus the other.

# 5 Campaign Rhetoric and Local Economic Conditions

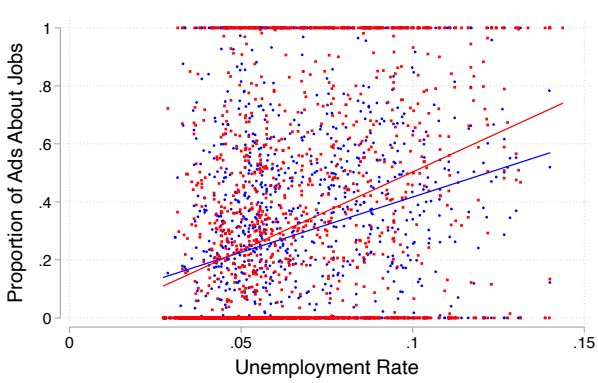
I begin with descriptive scatter plots showing how campaign ad rhetoric is correlated with the unemployment rate in the media market in which an ad runs. I then turn to formal econometric results. Recall the three perspectives I outlined above. The *minimal responsiveness* perspective implies that there should be little correlation between the local economy and campaign rhetoric. The *uniform responsiveness* perspective suggests that all candidates should react in similar ways, while the *conditional responsiveness* perspective suggests the reactions depend on the party (or other features) of the candidate.

## 5.1 Descriptive Evidence

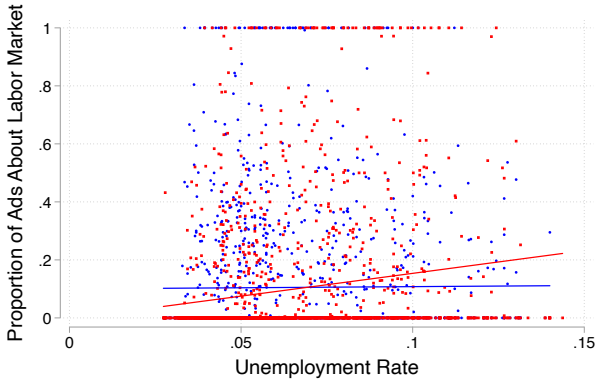
Figures 4 shows scatterplots between campaign rhetoric and the local unemployment rate as well as bivariate linear fits for Democratic and Republican candidates.[13] These plots show

[13]The mass of points at 0 and 1 primarily reflects candidates who run relatively few advertisements, or few unique advertisements. These points would be less influential if the regressions were weighted by the number of ads run. However, as noted above, the object of inference is the effect of the economy on the average candidates' strategy — not on the content of the average advertisement. Thus, I present unweighted results throughout.

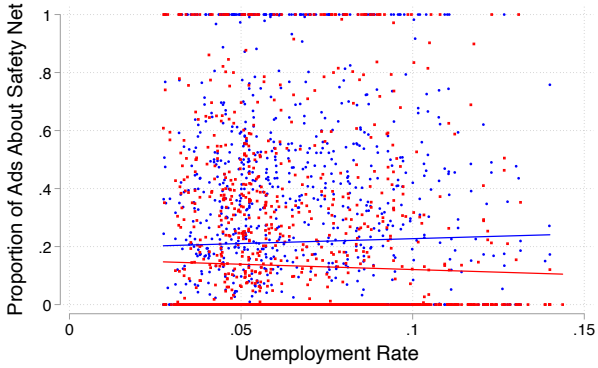
**Figure 4:** Correlation between Unemployment Rate and Campaign Focus




**(a)** Jobs




**(b)** Business Environment




**(c)** Safety Net

*Notes*: The horizontal axis shows the proportion of the population within a media market that is employed (averaged over the two-year congressional campaign cycle) and the vertical axis is the proportion of a candidate's ads that mention a given topic. Red lines show Republicans and blue lines show Democrats. To improve readability, the top and bottom 0.5% of observations in terms of unemployment rate are omitted.

descriptively how places experiences different local economic conditions also experience different rhetoric among congressional candidates. While these plots mix spatial and temporal variation in both economic conditions and campaign rhetoric, they show initial evidence of a link between campaign rhetoric and the local economy.

Beginning with the top left panel, there is a very strong positive correlation between the local unemployment rate and the extent to which candidates discuss jobs in their campaign advertisements. This pattern holds among both Democrats and Republicans. Candidates

facing a low local unemployment rate discuss jobs much less than those facing a high local unemployment rate. Candidates at the 10th percentile of unemployment (3.9%) mentioned jobs in roughly 19% of their campaign ads on average, compared to candidates in the 90th percentile of unemployment (9.6%), who discuss jobs in 43% of their ads. This result provides initial evidence that the content of politics varies substantially across different parts of the country.

The second panel, shows the correlations for discussion of the business environment more generally. Here the relationship depends on party. Republicans running in low-unemployment areas discuss the business environment in 6% of ads, on average, compared to 14% among those running in high-unemployment areas. In contrast, there is no correlation between the local economy and focus on the business environment for Democratic candidates.[14] While I will probe these results more formally in the next section, these partisan differences suggest that responsiveness may be conditioned by partisanship.

When it comes to safety net policies, the pattern is less clear. In the cross-section, there is a slight negative relationship between the unemployment rate and mentions of the safety net amongst Republicans, and a slight positive relationship amongst Democrats. However, for both parties the correlation is rather weak.

In sum, there is preliminary evidence suggesting that candidates campaign differently depending on the economic environment. In particular, they are more likely to focus on jobs and the business environment when they are running in high-unemployment areas. There are weaker patterns when it comes to safety net policies. The bivariate results also suggest some partisan heterogeneities, which I investigate more formally in the next section.

## 5.2 Regression Results

While the cross-sectional patterns are suggestive, the correlations may be driven by persistent differences across regions or national-level fluctuations in the economy and issue salience.

[14] In subsequent sections, I break down the results for these "composite" issues by their constituent sub-issues.

To get a better sense of the causal effect of local economic conditions on the issues that campaigns emphasize, I now turn to a series of panel regressions. In all regressions, I allow the effect of unemployment to vary according to the party of the candidate. For each issue, I first present regressions without fixed effects. These regressions correspond to the lines drawn on the bivariate scatter plots above. I then present a series of fixed effects regressions. Regressions with election cycle fixed effects exploit only geographic variation within election cycles. Adding state fixed effects compares media markets within the same state and year. Finally, adding media market fixed effects exploits within-media market variation over time. Overall, the results are relatively consistent across fixed effects specifications.

### 5.2.1 Jobs and Employment

The first set of regression results — for discussion of jobs — is presented in Table 2. In these regressions, I allow the effect of unemployment to vary according to whether the candidate belongs to the incumbent president's party. The logic for this choice stems from the fact that televised campaign ads that discuss jobs often seek merely to highlight the issue of jobs, rather than providing specific policy details. Following findings in Vavreck (2009) and de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2019), I expect that politicians of the president's party to try to downplay the state of the local economy when it is performing poorly, and vice versa for members of the out-party.

The results are consistent with these expectations. While all candidates discuss jobs more as unemployment rises — at least cross-sectionally — the effect is concentrated among candidates who are not from the president's party. A one percentage point increase in the local unemployment rate is associated with a roughly 2.5 percentage point increase in the share of ads devoted to jobs, on average, among candidates of the out-party.[15] This effect is consistent across fixed effects specifications, presented in columns 2-4. On the other hand, the effect of unemployment is smaller and, in some specifications, insignificant among members

[15]The standard deviation of the unemployment rate in the full sample is 2.3 percentage points. The standard deviation after residualizing media market and year fixed effects is 0.7 percentage points.

**Table 2:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Jobs

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Out-Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 5.06*** | 2.76*** | 2.31*** | 2.78*** |
| | (0.56) | (0.56) | (0.47) | (0.96) |
| *President's Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 3.56*** | 1.19** | 0.74 | 1.22 |
| | (0.36) | (0.46) | (0.48) | (0.95) |
| President's party | 0.06* | 0.07** | 0.06** | 0.06* |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Constant | −0.01 | | | |
| | (0.04) | | | |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | 0.007 | 0.004 | 0.003 | 0.004 |
| Observations | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,408 |
| R-squared | 0.09 | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.23 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 186 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss jobs. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. "Party diff $p$" refers to an $F$-test of equality between the effects of unemployment for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

of the president's party. The point estimate for these candidates fluctuates between roughly 0.75 and 1.2 percentage points. In all specifications, we can reject the null hypothesis that the effect does not vary by party at the 1% significance level.

This finding is consistent with candidates strategically de-emphasizing jobs and employment as a campaign issue when their party is likely to be blamed for the poor state of the economy. In Table A-5, I show that personal incumbency status does not moderate the effect to the same degree as co-partisanship with the president. Incumbent candidates respond no differently than challengers to changes in local unemployment. The lack of heterogeneity on this dimension makes sense given that individual members of Congress have little impact

**Table 3:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of the Business Environment

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Republicans* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 1.47*** | 0.55* | 0.52 | 0.55 |
| | (0.24) | (0.31) | (0.36) | (0.56) |
| *Democrats* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 0.00 | −0.93*** | −0.95*** | −1.04** |
| | (0.20) | (0.27) | (0.31) | (0.50) |
| Democrat | 0.10*** | 0.10*** | 0.10*** | 0.11*** |
| | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Constant | 0.00 | | | |
| | (0.02) | | | |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ |
| Observations | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,425 |
| R-squared | 0.01 | 0.07 | 0.10 | 0.13 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 187 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss the business environment. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. "Party diff $p$" refers to an $F$-test of equality between the effects of unemployment for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

over local economic conditions.

### 5.2.2 Business Environment

Next, I turn to more substantive policy issues, where conditional responsiveness may be defined more by longstanding party reputations rather than presidential incumbency. Table 3 shows how discussion of the business environment — a composite category composed of mentions of business, unions, and the minimum wage — is correlated with local unemployment. The results show that a higher unemployment rate is generally associated with decreased discussion of business environment policies among Democrats, and an increase

among Republicans. Across fixed effects specifications, a one percentage point increase in the unemployment rate is associated with a roughly one percentage point decrease in the proportion of ads run by Democrats that discuss the business environment, on average. The coefficient for Republicans is consistent across specifications, though it is insignificant in most specifications. Nonetheless, the point estimate suggests that a one percentage point increase in unemployment is associate with roughly half a percentage point increase in the proportion of ads about the business environment, amongst Republicans. In all specifications, we can reject the null hypothesis of equal effects for both parties.

As I show in the Appendix, these results are primarily driven by the "business" sub-issue. Republicans are slightly more likely to talk about business when unemployment is higher, while Democrats are significantly less likely to mention it. This comports with the longstanding reputation of Republicans as the party of business. In higher unemployment areas, Republican candidates may attempt to draw on this reputation to present themselves as having credible solutions to economic woes.

### 5.2.3 Safety Net Policies

Table 4 shows the results for discussion of safety net policies. As seen in the descriptive results previously, there is relatively little cross-sectional relationship between local unemployment and discussion of the safety net amongst candidates from either party. However, the story changes when exploiting only within-year variation. In columns 2-4, there is a consistent negative relationship — for both parties — between unemployment and discussion of the safety net. For Republicans, the effect of a one percentage point increase in unemployment is a reduction of the proportion of ads discussing safety net policies between about 1.1 and 2.3 percentage points, depending on the set of fixed effects included. For Democrats, there is a negative relationship in all the fixed effects regressions, though the effect size is smaller than for Republicans — with point estimates ranging between 0.2 and 1.5 percentage points — and insignificant in all but one specification. Again, there are significant differences

**Table 4:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Safety Net Policies

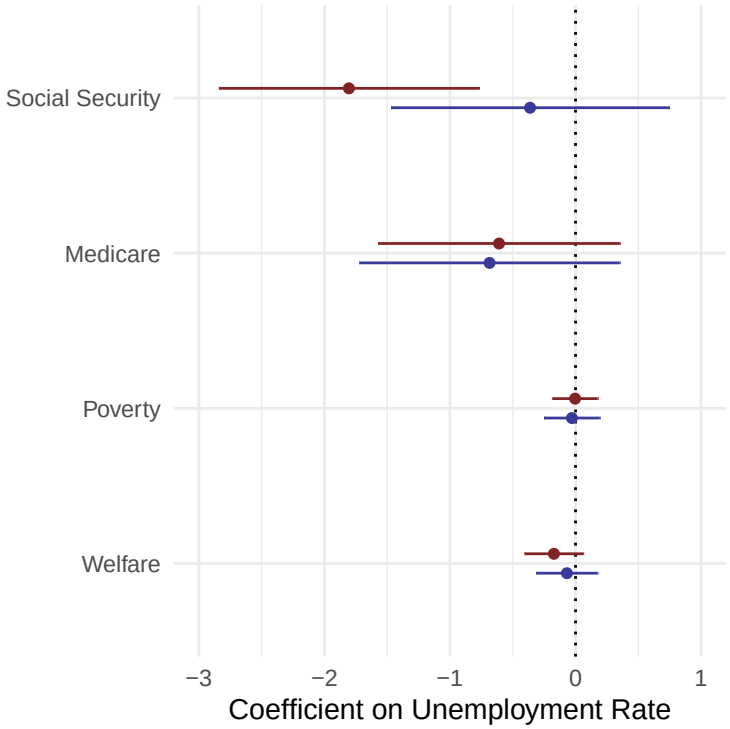
| Outcome: | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Republicans* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | −0.38 | −1.17*** | −1.06* | −2.37*** |
| | (0.25) | (0.44) | (0.61) | (0.63) |
| *Democrats* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 0.40 | −0.34 | −0.21 | −1.48** |
| | (0.32) | (0.53) | (0.69) | (0.68) |
| Democrat | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Constant | 0.16*** | | | |
| | (0.02) | | | |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | 0.038 | 0.030 | 0.026 | 0.023 |
| Observations | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,425 |
| R-squared | 0.02 | 0.09 | 0.12 | 0.16 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 187 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss safety net policies. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. "Party diff $p$" refers to an $F$-test of equality between the effects of unemployment for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

between Democrats and Republicans. This result is again consistent with the conditional responsiveness perspective. Democratic candidates — who are likely to be seen as more competent on issues related to safety net and welfare policy — overall do not de-emphasize this issue area as strongly as Republicans.

Overall, however, it appears that candidates do not turn to discussion of safety net policies in response to increases in unemployment. From a traditional political economy perspective, this is somewhat surprising. Especially in a federal system like the United States, we might expect that higher unemployment would be associated with more demand for safety net spending and social insurance policies. The results are partly explained by the

**Figure 5:** Coefficient Plot for Sub-Topics of Safety Net Policies




*Notes*: This plot shows point estimates and 95% confidence intervals for a regression of each of the constituent components of the safety net policy outcome on employment. Each regression includes media market and year fixed effects.

inclusion of programs oriented toward seniors such as Medicare and Social Security in the definition of safety net policies. Figure 5 plots the coefficients for models where the outcome is the proportion of ads mentioning each of the constituent sub-topics of safety net policies.[16] There is nearly no effect when it comes to discussion of poverty or welfare, for either party. Instead, the majority of the effect on safety net policies stems from a decline in discussion of Social Security and Medicare in higher unemployment areas. As these programs benefit seniors, the baseline salience of these policies likely does not respond much to changes in local employment conditions.

[16]These models also include with media market and election cycle fixed effects, and therefore exploit the most fine-grained variation available.

## 5.3 Electoral Competitiveness Does Not Increase Responsiveness

A natural question is whether patterns of responsiveness differ according to the partisan leanings of a district. Robust electoral competition between Democrats and Republicans may encourage stronger responsiveness to local conditions, as small changes in campaign strategy, tailored specifically toward voters, may entail large changes in the probability of winning. By the same token, candidates in safe seats may have less incentive to respond to local concerns, and may instead focus on issues that dominate the national political agenda.[17]

To test this hypothesis, I use the partisan voting index (PVI) at the media market level as a measure of the partisan leanings of the area.[18] The PVI is simply the Democrat's share of the two-party vote share in the most recent presidential election within the media market, minus the national two-party vote share. I use this measure for two reasons. First, presidential results are more likely to capture overall partisan leaning rather than reflect factors specific to congressional candidates. Second, the boundaries of media markets do not change, while congressional district boundaries change several times within study period.

I classify media markets as Democratic leaning if the PVI is less than -5 (indicating the Democratic presidential candidate got 5 percentage points higher vote share in the district than the national vote), Republican if the PVI is greater than 5, and competitive otherwise. I then estimate the same models as above, with market and cycle fixed effects, but allowing responsiveness to differ according to competitiveness.

The results are presented visually in Figure 6. This figure shows the coefficient on unemployment rate for the three outcome variables in different subgroups defined by party and partisan landscape. There are minimal differences in the coefficients according to local partisanship. In all types of districts, the level of responsiveness is roughly the same. The gap between Democratic and Republican responsiveness tends to be smaller in competitive

[17] This logic mirrors that in Grimmer (2013*a*), who finds that representatives in marginal districts focus on credit-claiming for appropriations brought back to their districts, while those in safe seats focus on position-taking — which often involves invoking national-level debates.

[18] These data are collected by DailyKos Elections and are available at `https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2018/8/12/1786221/-`.

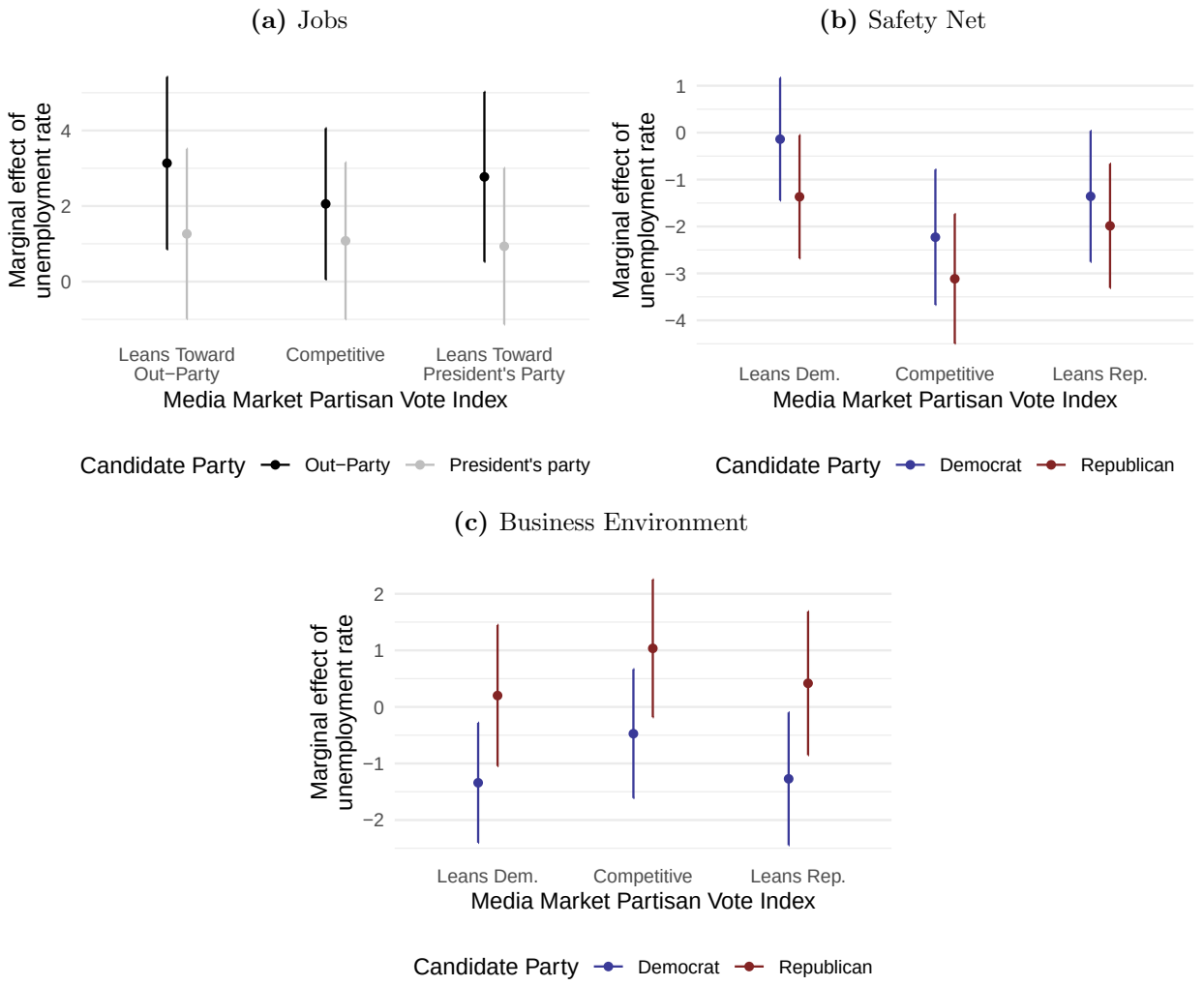



**Figure 6:** Responsiveness by partisan leaning of the media market. Points show coefficients from regressions with media market and cycle fixed effects, while bars show robust clustered 95% confidence intervals.

districts, but these differences are not statistically significant. In sum, there is minimal evidence that electoral competitiveness induces stronger responsiveness to the economy.

# 6 Discussion and Conclusion

These findings provides strong evidence that, contrary to the nationalization hypothesis, the issue substance of political campaigns is highly variable across the country. Campaign rhetoric does not merely reflect the partisanship of the candidate, but is responsive to the

state of the local economy. The results cut against claims that politicians throughout the U.S. are homogeneous groups of Democrats and Republicans that position themselves primarily in reference to high-salience, national-level debates. Of the three hypotheses outlined above, the *minimal responsiveness* perspective thus has the least support.

Further, there are systematic partisan differences in responses to local economic conditions, in ways that are inconsistent with the *uniform responsiveness* hypothesis but broadly in line with expectations derived from the *conditional responsiveness* hypothesis. High-unemployment areas see increased discussion of jobs and employment among all candidates. But the increase is especially pronounced among candidates who do not belong to the president's party. Given the difficulty of teasing apart causes for local economic performance, voters may reasonably attribute economic conditions to the president's party (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2019). Candidates from the president's party may therefore seek to change the terms on which voters make their choice — deflecting away from a focus on the current state of the economy and towards other issues (Vavreck, 2009).

Other issues related to economic policy also see persistent partisan differences. Democrats in high unemployment areas de-emphasize discussion of the business environment, consistent with Republicans being the party of business. Conversely, high-unemployment areas see reductions in discussion of safety net policies, especially amongst Republicans.

These patterns shed light on politics in an American economy that is de-nationalizing. Voters in high unemployment regions are likely to be focused especially on jobs and employment, and may be drawn to rhetoric emphasizing this issue. But politicians do not appear to emphasize safety net policies as a solution to increases in unemployment. Increases in unemployment are associated with *less* emphasis on safety net policies, especially amongst Republicans. This pattern is somewhat surprising from a traditional political economy perspective, which might suggest that rising unemployment be met with stronger social insurance protections. This discrepancy may be driven by the fact that the safety net in the United States primarily comprises transfers to the elderly. Indeed, my results for safety net

rhetoric are driven by a decline in discussion of Social Security and Medicare in response to changes in local unemployment.

How can we reconcile my findings with prominent results suggesting that there is little responsiveness to constituency concerns? Much of this result is due to differences in the outcome variables used. Researchers have long noted that legislators' partisanship appears to dominate characteristics of their constituencies when it comes to determining their voting patterns in Congress. Nearly 40 years ago, Poole and Rosenthal (1984) noted that senators who belong to different parties but represent the same state vote much differently than we would expect if voting were primarily determined by constituency characteristics. More recent investigations have largely corroborated this finding (Fowler and Hall, 2016; Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart, 2001).

However, these studies do not necessarily mean that members of Congress across the country are unresponsive to conditions in their districts. Indeed, looking beyond votes, there is evidence that members of Congress are indeed quite responsive to their constituencies. Committee assignments in the House largely reflect the needs of representatives' districts (Adler and Lapinski, 1997). The way that senators present themselves to their constituents also varies systematically as a function of underlying political conditions in their home states (Grimmer, 2013*b*).

This paper presents evidence that candidates frame their campaigns differently depending on conditions in their home districts. While the findings are consistent with theories of strategic campaigning, they also likely have downstream implications for representation. The issues that candidates discuss signals their future legislative priorities (Sulkin, 2009; Sulkin and Swigger, 2008). They may also influence the way their constituents perceive those issues — both in terms of persuading them and increasing their salience (Lenz, 2013).

Overall, these results paint the picture of political responses to local economic conditions in ways that are interpretable through theories of campaign strategy. While there is a large deal of variation in the issues that congressional candidates emphasize, there are consistent

differences in the issue content of politics between places that are doing relatively well and places doing relatively worse off. On average, candidates adopt positions on the campaign trail in a strategic manner that is responsive to local conditions. Taken together, these findings show how economic geography acts as a constraint on political nationalization.

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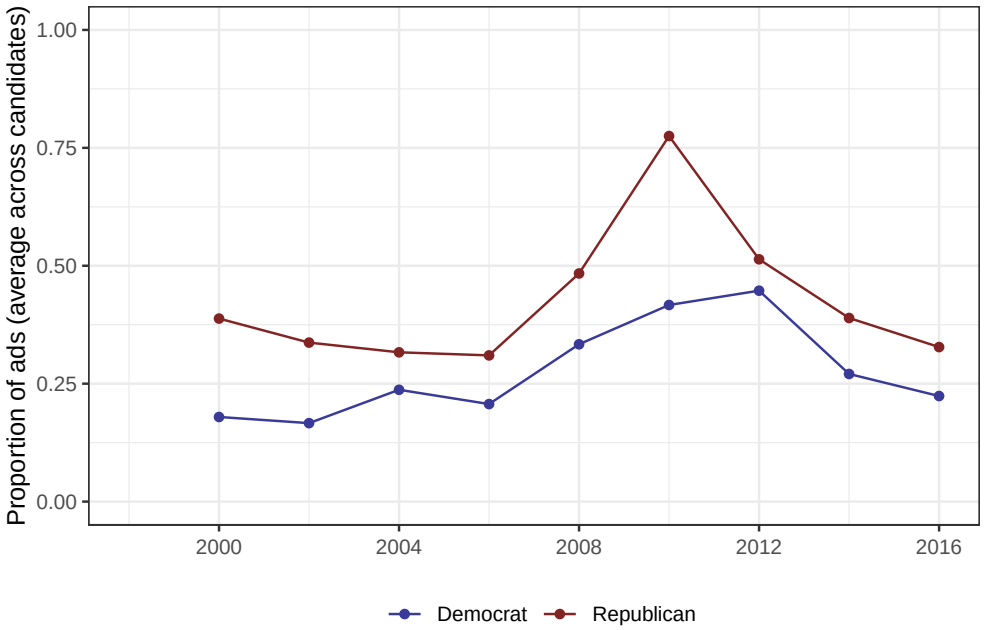
# Appendix for "Responsiveness in a Polarized Era: How Local Economic Conditions Structure Campaign Rhetoric"

**Figure A-1:** Candidate' Emphasis on Fiscal Policy, 2000-2016




# A Responsiveness on Fiscal Policy

Another set of issues on which politicians might be responsive to local economic conditions is fiscal policy. For example, during the height of the Great Recession in 2010, politicians aligned with the Tea Party movement campaigned on promises to slash government spending and cut the deficit. While these were not standard countercyclical fiscal policy proposals, they were nonetheless pitched as a way to stimulate the economy. It is worth asking, then, whether discussion of fiscal policy is also driven by local economic conditions.

Empirically, I consider an ad as discussing fiscal policy if it mentions taxes, government spending, the deficit, or recessions. Figure A-1 plots the average proportion of ads mentioning fiscal policy over time. There was a large spike in 2010 coinciding with the Tea Party election, and Republicans consistently discuss this issue more than Democrats.

Table A-1 shows regression results analogous to those in the main text, but for the fiscal policy outcome. results for the fiscal policy outcome — government spending, the budget deficit, recessions, and taxes. These results are more sensitive to the source of variation than

**Table A-1:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Fiscal Policy

| Outcome: | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Republicans* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 3.81*** | −0.36 | 0.70 | 1.55* |
| | (0.57) | (0.60) | (0.58) | (0.82) |
| *Democrats* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 1.87*** | −2.29*** | −1.26** | −0.42 |
| | (0.52) | (0.49) | (0.51) | (0.80) |
| Democrat | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.04 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Constant | 0.21*** | 0.48*** | 0.42*** | 0.36*** |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ |
| Observations | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,425 |
| R-squared | 0.08 | 0.16 | 0.19 | 0.23 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 187 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss fiscal policy. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. The bottom line reports the $p$-value for a test of equality between the effects for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

the other outcomes. Cross-sectionally, both Democrats and Republicans running when the local unemployment rate is higher tend to discuss fiscal policy more. However, this appears to be largely due to temporal variation in the unemployment rate. Once election cycle fixed effects are included, the coefficient for Democrats becomes roughly −2.3, and for Republicans becomes insignificant. In column 4, which contains the most exacting specification, with cycle and market fixed effects, there is a positive coefficient of 1.5 for Republicans and a negative coefficient of −0.4 for Democrats. In all cases, there is a significantly larger increase (or smaller decrease) for Republicans than for Democrats.

Interpreting these results is less straightforward than previous issues. In times of economic

**Table A-2:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Fiscal Policy

| Outcome: | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Out-Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | $4.86^{***}$ | 0.71 | $1.71^{***}$ | $2.58^{***}$ |
| | (0.67) | (0.64) | (0.59) | (0.84) |
| *President's Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | $0.75^{*}$ | $-3.51^{***}$ | $-2.52^{***}$ | $-1.61^{**}$ |
| | (0.42) | (0.47) | (0.51) | (0.81) |
| President's party | $0.21^{***}$ | $0.22^{***}$ | $0.21^{***}$ | $0.21^{***}$ |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Constant | $0.10^{**}$ | $0.36^{***}$ | $0.30^{***}$ | $0.25^{***}$ |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ | $< 0.001$ |
| Observations | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,431 | 3,425 |
| R-squared | 0.06 | 0.13 | 0.17 | 0.21 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 187 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss fiscal policy. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. The bottom line reports the $p$-value for a test of equality between the effects for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

decline, standard countercyclical arguments prescribe increased spending. By this standard, politicians might be expected to deflect away from concerns about the budget or government spending (which is often target of scorn in political rhetoric). Republicans, especially, may want to back away from their reputation for low spending and low taxes. On the other hand, experience in the 2010 Tea Party wave — during the height of the recession — suggests that messaging denouncing government spending may be appealing to voters. In that case, Republicans should embrace their small-government reputation.

Another possibility that would help to explain these inconsistent and theoretically ambiguous results is that discussion of fiscal policy instead follows a similar strategic logic

as general discussion of jobs — whereby co-partisans of the president attempt to deflect when the economy is performing poorly. Table A-2 confirms this suspicion. Rather than following an ideological logic, discussion of fiscal policy appears to be more closely governed by retrospective voting considerations. Candidates who do not belong to the same party of the president significantly increase the amount of attention devoted to fiscal policy in high-unemployment areas relative to low-unemployment areas. In contrast, candidates who belong to the president's party discuss fiscal policy less in high-unemployment areas.

Still, these results are driven by the relatively anomalous 2010 Tea Party election. In Table A-3, I re-estimate the same regressions while omitting 2010. The coefficients for both parties shrink in magnitude — especially among out-party candidates. In the most stringent specification, with market and cycle fixed effects, the coefficient on unemployment for members of the president's party shrinks to an insignificant $-0.23$, and the coefficient for out-party candidates shrinks to an insignificant 0.77.

Overall, discussion of fiscal policy by congressional candidates appears to follow similar patterns as discussion of jobs and employment — with the caveat that during the 2010 election cycle, fiscal policy took on unusually high salience. The results here are thus largely driven by the insurgent wave of Republicans in 2010 discussing fiscal policy in areas hit harder by the recession.

# B Jobs Results, by Party and Personal Incumbency Status

Table A-4 shows results for the jobs outcome where the effect of unemployment is allowed to vary according to whether the candidate is a Democrat or Republican. Table A-5 shows the results when the effect is allowed to vary by personal incumbency status of the candidate.

**Table A-3:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Fiscal Policy, Excluding 2010

| Outcome: | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy | Fiscal Policy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Out-Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | $1.77^{**}$ | $-1.77^{**}$ | $-0.63$ | 0.77 |
| | (0.82) | (0.72) | (0.83) | (1.14) |
| *President's Party* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 0.50 | $-2.77^{***}$ | $-1.63^{**}$ | $-0.23$ |
| | (0.66) | (0.55) | (0.72) | (1.04) |
| President's party | $0.08^{*}$ | $0.07^{*}$ | 0.06 | 0.06 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Constant | $0.23^{***}$ | $0.44^{***}$ | $0.37^{***}$ | $0.29^{***}$ |
| | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.07) |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Sample | No 2010 | No 2010 | No 2010 | No 2010 |
| Observations | 2,830 | 2,830 | 2,829 | 2,822 |
| R-squared | 0.00 | 0.06 | 0.10 | 0.15 |
| Party diff $p$ | 0.066 | 0.145 | 0.144 | 0.143 |
| Number of Markets | 188 | 188 | 188 | 180 |
| Number of Cycles | 8 | 8 | 8 | 8 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss fiscal policy. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. The bottom line reports the $p$-value for a test of equality between the effects for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

**Table A-4:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Jobs, by Party

| Outcome: | Jobs | Jobs | Jobs | Jobs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Republicans* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 4.95*** | 2.60*** | 2.21*** | 2.61*** |
| | (0.54) | (0.55) | (0.45) | (0.94) |
| *Democrats* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 3.69*** | 1.37*** | 0.87* | 1.39 |
| | (0.36) | (0.45) | (0.49) | (0.95) |
| Democrat | 0.05 | 0.05 | 0.06* | 0.05 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Constant | −0.01 | 0.14*** | 0.17*** | 0.14** |
| | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.06) |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Party diff $p$ | 0.017 | 0.013 | 0.007 | 0.012 |
| Observations | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,408 |
| R-squared | 0.09 | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.22 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 186 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss jobs. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. The bottom line reports the $p$-value for a test of equality between the effects for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

**Table A-5:** Relationship Between Local Unemployment and Discussion of Jobs, by Incumbency Status

| Outcome: | Jobs | Jobs | Jobs | Jobs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Non-Incumbents* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 4.14*** | 1.96*** | 1.54*** | 2.02** |
| | (0.45) | (0.47) | (0.43) | (0.94) |
| *Incumbents* | | | | |
| Unempl. Rate | 4.55*** | 2.03*** | 1.65*** | 2.05** |
| | (0.42) | (0.50) | (0.45) | (0.91) |
| Incumbent | −0.00 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Constant | 0.02 | 0.16*** | 0.18*** | 0.15** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.06) |
| Cycle FE | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| State FE | | | ✓ | |
| Market FE | | | | ✓ |
| Incumbent diff $p$ | 0.342 | 0.853 | 0.781 | 0.938 |
| Observations | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,415 | 3,408 |
| R-squared | 0.09 | 0.14 | 0.19 | 0.22 |
| Number of Markets | 193 | 193 | 193 | 186 |
| Number of Cycles | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |

*Notes*: Observations are at the candidate-media market level. The outcome variable is the proportion of candidate's ads in a given media market that discuss jobs. Unemployment rate is averaged within a media market over each 2-year House election cycle. The bottom line reports the $p$-value for a test of equality between the effects for Democrats and Republicans. Standard errors are clustered at the media market level. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.