

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Issue Attention in Congressional Primary Elections

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## ABSTRACT

Prominent theories of campaign issue strategy provide three main perspectives candidates can adopt when deciding what issues to discuss: (1) issues voters view their party as “owning”, (2) “trespassing” onto issues that the other party owns, and (3) addressing timely and salient issues (e.g., “wave riding”). This paper examines candidate issue messaging strategies in congressional primary campaigns. By isolating party-owned issues and issue trespassing from wave riding, a distinction not typically made in previous literature, we explore how candidate characteristics and electoral conditions influence the use of these three strategies in primary elections. Leveraging a dataset of campaign website issue platforms for nearly all congressional candidates running in primary elections from 2018 to 2022, we find that incumbent candidates dedicate relatively more of their campaign platform to party-owned and opposing party-owned issues compared to challengers. Further, we find that candidates who must appeal to a partisan primary electorate spend relatively less time engaging in issue trespassing, but discuss salient, wave riding issues more. Overall, our results contribute to the growing body of literature on issue messaging strategies and primary elections.

## 1 | Introduction

Intra-party elections encourage candidates not only to cater to the party's base of support but also require candidates to distinguish themselves from fellow co-partisans. To do this, candidates design campaigns to best present themselves to voters, communicating information about their background, qualifications, and the positions they hold on policy and political issues.

Previous research highlights that the most effective (i.e., successful) campaigns are those that resonate with a majority of voters' preferences for candidate experience and issue positions (Popkin 1991; Petrocik 1996). For decades, one of the decisive determinants of a successful congressional candidate was previous elected experience (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). However, more recent scholarship demonstrates that voters may no longer value elected experience the way they once did (Jacobson 2015; Porter and Treul 2025) and that voters from each party have distinct preferences over the past occupational experiences and identities of candidates (e.g., Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Porter and Treul 2025).

This shift in the electoral landscape highlights the increasing importance of candidates' issue strategies, particularly in primary elections. That is, if candidates can no longer bank on past political experience being the accelerant for success, they must find other ways to set themselves apart from their primary competitors. Thus, the issue positions a candidate communicates while campaigning are increasingly relevant to a candidate's success. Yet, there is little scholarly agreement on what issues candidates should discuss during a campaign. Early scholarship on candidate issue positions argued that the formation of issue agendas should cater to the median voter's preferences (Downs 1957). Other work suggests that candidates might be better off highlighting issues that align with a majority of constituents, even if not located at the median, and downplay ones that do not (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Simon 2002; Sulkin and Evans 2006). By doing this, campaigns can prime voters to think about these issues and then, hopefully, reward the candidate who focuses on them. More recently, research highlights three prominent strategies that candidates can adopt in their campaign issue agendas: issues that are advantageous to their party (i.e., party-owned issues), issues owned by the other party

(i.e., issue trespassing), and issues that are currently salient to the American public (i.e., wave riding). Candidates can also choose to focus on performance issues, or those issues where partisan ownership is weaker and more contingent on current conditions (Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013). For example, the economy is frequently treated as a performance issue, where partisanship strongly shapes how voters evaluate conditions (e.g., Bartels 2002).

Choosing what issues to highlight in a campaign today is complicated by the fact that congressional campaigns have changed significantly in recent years. Most past scholarship on issue strategy focuses on the general election stage of congressional contests (Ansolahehere and Iyengar 1994; Sides 2007; Banda 2013).<sup>1</sup> Yet, there are decreasing numbers of districts that are competitive for both parties (Mayhew 1974; Ferejohn 1977; Abramowitz 2006; Rodden 2019). According to Cook PVI (Partisan Voting Index),<sup>2</sup> in the 2022 midterm, just 45 seats were considered competitive, thereby making the results of the general election likely a foregone conclusion in 390 districts. Primary elections, meanwhile, have become increasingly competitive in recent years (e.g., Hirano and Snyder 2019). Furthermore, even in non-competitive primaries, the threat of primary competition weighs heavily on incumbents' campaign strategies (Rackey and Thorning 2024; Case 2027). Given that co-partisans need to distinguish themselves from one another in primaries, studying what issues congressional campaigns highlight in these contests can offer important insights into what types of candidates utilize particular issue strategies and how primary candidates attempt to differentiate on the issues. Since most primary voters are highly partisan (Burden 2001) and well-informed (Sides et al. 2020), we expect primary candidates will use party-focused issue appeals and focus on current events in order to increase their chance of election.

This paper conducts a systematic analysis of the issue strategies primary election candidates employ in modern congressional elections. We leverage candidate campaign websites from all U.S. House primary contests from 2018 to 2022, which allows us to analyze widespread issue strategies in primary election campaigns and evaluate which candidates employ which strategies. It also gives us variation in primary type, including both partisan primaries and non-partisan primaries (e.g., California's top-two primary). We theorize that candidates, looking to set themselves apart from others in the contest, will leverage their distinct advantages in crafting their issue agendas. Gaining a better understanding of how primary candidates distinguish their issue agendas is important for our understanding of congressional campaigns today, especially since the issues candidates focus on in elections are likely the ones they will focus on in Congress (Sulkin 2009, 2011).

Analyzing party-owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave riding, we find that candidates employ all three messaging strategies in congressional primary elections. Moreover, candidates' strategic messaging choices vary systematically based on their political experience and the institutional features of the primary election. These findings have implications both for the types of messages voters are exposed to during campaigns and for how candidates think about differentiating themselves from fellow partisans in primary contests.

## 2 | Congressional Campaigns and Issue Agendas

Candidates recognize the importance of communicating on issues where voters perceive a built-in advantage and indeed do often center campaigns and campaign communications around issues owned by their party (Riker 1990; Carsey 2009; Meeks 2019). Party-owned issues refer to the issues that the public views a party as being "experts" on (Petrocik 1996) or better at handling (Egan 2013). Egan (2013) and, more recently, Fagan (2019) suggest party-owned issues are a function of a party's prioritization of that issue, rather than its past performance or the specific policy positions it takes. The issues that are considered "owned" by the parties are remarkably stable over time. For example, as Egan (2013) demonstrates, the issues of crime, taxes, and the military have been consistently viewed by voters as Republican-owned since the 1970s. In contrast, the issues of health care, jobs, and education have been consistently owned by the Democrats. Importantly, not all issues are considered owned by one party or the other.

It is also worth noting that in today's polarized and partisan environment, issue voting is likely less prominent (Wright et al. 2022). According to Wright et al. (2022), partisanship dominates voter decision-making, but Independents still utilize issue voting. Yet, this is precisely why this paper focuses on primary elections, where partisanship is held constant. In primary elections, voters cannot use partisanship to determine vote choice, but they can identify the most pressing problems and determine which candidate is focusing her campaign on those issues.

Various theories exist about the extent to which candidates should engage in discussing party owned issues. Divergence theories of general election campaign strategy suggest that candidates should center their campaigns on issues that advantage them electorally (Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002). These theories predict candidates dedicate a large proportion of their campaign to party owned issues. This is because a candidate's party is thought to be more competent on these issues and, therefore, enjoys a relative advantage over the other party. Banda (2019) finds that co-partisans prefer candidates who focus on issues owned by their party.

At the same time, however, candidates may still choose to discuss issues owned by the opposing party, also known as issue trespassing (Banda 2013; Banda and Carsey 2015; Sides 2007). Candidates can issue trespass for a variety of reasons, but primarily, this strategy is meant to mitigate the other party's advantage on an issue and thus engage in issue convergence. This difference is particularly pronounced in competitive, general elections, which suggests that a candidate's willingness to engage in issue trespassing is related to the competitiveness of the electoral contest. Relatedly, and important for our study, Banda and Carsey (2015) find that candidates will be more willing to issue trespass when faced with a competitive general election but will focus more attention on party-owned issues when facing a contested primary election.

Beyond issue ownership, other literature on candidate issue agendas focuses on how candidates address current issues of the day that are especially salient to voters. In a media and information-rich environment, voters are aware of major news

events and the issues that garner national attention. Thus, they may cast their ballot according to how candidates address these salient, timely issues (Dalager 1996; Malzahn and Hall 2023). Recognizing this, the theory of wave riding posits that candidates pay more attention to issues that are salient to the public (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Kaplan et al. 2006). As Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) highlight, candidates need to communicate their credentials on the issues that the public is most concerned with to be viewed as informed, responsive, and overall strong candidates.

Although previous work frequently studies wave riding within party-owned issues (Kahn and Kenney 1999; Kaplan et al. 2006), we are interested in wave riding issues that neither party owns. Issues that are not party owned are typically what Egan (2013) refers to as non-consensus issues. This is because there is not universal agreement between the two political parties over the ultimate goal of the issue area. For the purposes of this paper, we are particularly interested in how different candidates engage in wave riding on these non-consensus issues. For our wave riding issues, we focus on abortion, election administration, and policing.

### 3 | Studying Campaign Issues in the Modern Era

Although previous scholarship identified two broad categories of issues that candidates can focus on in campaigns: party owned/non-party owned issues and wave riding issues, there is little research on which congressional candidates engage in these strategies and under what conditions. Most previous research on issue ownership and wave riding focuses on campaigns at the presidential level (Petrocik 1996; Damore 2004). An exception to this is work by Abbe et al. (2003) who find that when a congressional candidate and voter agree on what the most important issue in the election is, and the candidate's party owns the issue, the voter is more likely to support the candidate. This finding helps demonstrate a clear connection between campaign issues and the strategies of candidates. Other work that focuses on congressional campaigns examines how candidates employ these strategies through television advertising prior to 2008 (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Sides 2007; Banda 2015). The focus on television advertising restricts the sample of candidates to those in competitive races and those with enough money to produce ads and purchase airtime (Druckman et al. 2009), and largely ignores the vast majority of candidates for the House of Representatives. For example, in 2018, fewer than 15% of challengers and 40% of incumbents running for the U.S. House spent money on TV advertisements (Fowler et al. 2020). In addition, the races where candidates are spending this money will be systematically different than races where candidates are not spending money on television advertisements. This data limitation restricts the broader understanding of congressional campaign issue strategies, especially in primary elections.

Furthermore, it is important to note that, with the exception of Banda and Carsey (2015), the literature on campaign issue agendas has focused almost exclusively on the general election stage of congressional campaigns. Yet, in modern congressional campaigns, much of the competition has shifted

to the primary stage. As mentioned above, when compared to congressional elections prior to 2008, districts have become safer at the general election stage and relatively more competitive at the primary election stage (Hirano and Snyder 2019). In addition, several states have adopted changes to their primary election rules since 2008, including the adoption of non-partisan primaries, which may shift the incentives candidates face when running for Congress. The dynamics of primary campaigns may also be shaped by the growing prominence of presidential endorsements.<sup>3</sup> Changes to the congressional campaign environment, such as these, make studying the issue agendas of primary candidates critical for bettering our understanding of congressional elections. Given this previous literature, we theorize that the issues candidates focus on in a primary campaign will depend on candidate characteristics and primary election dynamics.

In the following subsections, we outline our expectations for what types of candidates and primary dynamics lead to more or less engagement with each of the three campaign strategies—issue ownership, issue trespassing, and wave riding—relative to other candidates in congressional primaries.

#### 3.1 | Previous Elected Experience

We first expect there to be differences by candidate experience in the proportion of issue text dedicated to the three campaign strategies. Despite the concept of issue ownership being untethered to party performance on issues, existing literature suggests that members of Congress are more likely to both prioritize party-owned issues on their legislative agenda and to successfully legislate on those issues (Fagan 2019; Egan 2013; Green and Jennings 2017). After all, experienced candidates are already a part of the party structure. They have secured a party's nomination in the past and have at least some understanding of what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican. While all candidates enjoy an electoral advantage from discussing party-owned issues, it is likely incumbents and experienced challengers discuss these issues more than inexperienced challengers because they have a record on these issues from their past service and can point to concrete examples of past work in the relevant issue area. Furthermore, experienced challengers and incumbents are strategic actors and have experience running a successful campaign, so it is likely that these candidates more readily recognize the importance of addressing issues that voters perceive them as having a built-in advantage (Riker 1990; Carsey 2009; Meeks 2019).

**H1.** *Incumbent candidates and experienced challengers will dedicate a greater proportion of their issue text to party owned issues than inexperienced candidates.*

We also expect differences in the proportion of a candidate's platform dedicated to issues owned by the other party (issue trespassing) by experience. While existing research suggests that legislators prioritize party owned issues while in office (Egan 2013), it is also the case that legislators cannot work exclusively on issues that benefit their party. In their capacity as a legislator, incumbents must regularly engage in public position taking on a wide variety of issues. In other words, incumbent candidates regularly need to take votes on, and more

broadly engage with, issues that are owned by the other party. Because they are required to engage in a wide variety of issues, incumbent candidates might feel pressure to talk about these issues when on the campaign trail. The majority of literature suggests that congressional candidates are held accountable for their roll call voting behavior (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Bovitz and Carson 2006). This is particularly the case on issues that are highly salient to voters, such as healthcare, with specific roll call votes exercising a large impact on an incumbent candidate's electoral margins (Dulio and Adkins 2013; Bussing et al. 2022). Incumbents often feel pressure to explain these positions, even when their position is out of step with voters (Grose et al. 2015). Challenger candidates likely do not have the same sense of obligation to talk about issues owned by the other party and will therefore engage in less issue trespassing than incumbent candidates.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, we hypothesize that:

**H2.** *Incumbent candidates will dedicate a higher proportion of their campaign issue text to issues owned by the opposing party (engage in issue trespassing) than non-incumbents.*

Additionally, we do not expect the proportion of a platform dedicated to issue trespassing to be uniform across all challengers. We expect that experienced challengers will make more strategic decisions about what issues to discuss and omit from their campaign platform. Specifically, it is likely that experienced challengers understand the built in advantages to leaning on party owned issues, whereas inexperienced candidates might not make that same assessment. Specifically, we expect that:

**H3.** *Inexperienced challengers will dedicate a higher proportion of their campaign issue text to issues owned by the opposing party (engage in issue trespassing) than challengers with previous elected experience.*

Finally, we expect incumbents to differ from challengers when it comes to wave riding issues. Many wave riding issues, such as the three we examine in this paper (abortion, election administration, and policing), are highly salient but also highly polarizing to voters. Given this, we expect that incumbent candidates are less likely to engage with wave riding issues than challengers. Incumbents may opt to avoid discussing the issues of the day and instead fall back on focusing on their record, a luxury that challenger candidates do not have, as well as tackling the issues they've already taken stated positions on. Challengers, on the other hand, are often presenting themselves to the electorate for the first time and therefore are likely to take positions on the issues that are currently salient to voters. Furthermore, we also expect that the difference in wave riding between incumbents and challengers will be particularly pronounced among experienced challengers. The strategic nature of experienced candidates suggests they will more readily recognize the importance of addressing issues that are highly salient to voters (Jacobson 1989).

**H4.** *Challenger candidates (particularly experienced challengers) will devote more of their campaign platform to wave riding issues than incumbents.*

## 3.2 | Primary Election Dynamics

Beyond candidate experience, we also expect that primary election dynamics shape candidate issue strategy. By election dynamics, we mean the underlying electoral rules and race conditions a candidate faces. Depending on the electoral rules or competition faced during the primary, the voters that candidates need to appeal to differ (see Banda 2019). For candidates running in partisan primaries, candidates are mainly concerned with persuading a smaller subset of co-partisan voters. Candidates running in non-partisan primaries (e.g., top-two primaries) need to appeal to a primary electorate with a higher proportion of independent and out-partisan voters. Moreover, candidates who do not face competition in the primary election can turn their attention to the broader electorate instead of first persuading a subset of voters. We expect these varying conditions affect who candidates appeal to, and thereby, their campaign issue strategy.

We first expect the partisan dynamics of a primary election contest to shape the proportion of platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. Our expectations here are consistent with the results of Banda and Carsey (2015) who find that candidates competing in contested elections engage in a lower percentage of issue messaging on issues owned by the opposite party than candidates in uncontested primaries. Messaging on issues owned by the other party means spending time talking about issues that even voters from a candidate's party see as a relative weakness for their party. If candidates need to persuade co-partisan voters to support their candidacy, either because of a partisan primary or a contested primary, talking about these issues puts them at a disadvantage at this stage. In uncontested primaries or states with non-partisan primaries, however, candidates are not focused on a subset of partisan voters. This means that these candidates can place a greater emphasis on a broader electorate from the get-go. As such, these candidates will be more likely to issue trespass in order to chip away at the built-in advantage that the opposition candidate has on certain issues heading into the general election. In line with this theory, we hypothesize that:

**H5.** *Candidates who need to appeal to a partisan primary electorate (contested primary; partisan primary election rules) will dedicate a lower proportion of their issue text to issue trespassing.*

In a similar vein, we also expect that primary dynamics will be related to the frequency with which candidates talk about wave riding issues. For candidates who first need to persuade a smaller subset of partisan voters, we expect these candidates to be more responsive to non-consensus wave riding issues. These issues are important to voters, and tackling them can set the candidate apart from the partisan competition, so to ignore these issues could be politically costly in the primary (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Specifically:

**H6.** *Candidates who need to appeal to a partisan primary electorate (contested primary; partisan primary election rules) will devote more of their issue text to wave riding issues.*

## 4 | Data

To analyze under what conditions candidates for Congress engage in these various issue strategies in primary elections, we rely on a dataset of congressional campaign website issue platforms from 2018 to 2022 (Porter et al. 2025).<sup>5</sup> Candidates' campaign websites act as an "information hub" for all parts of the campaign, including candidates' issue positions (Herrnson et al. 2019). Candidates dedicate significant time and resources to crafting their campaign websites, knowing that potential voters, donors, journalists, and other election stakeholders may view them to learn about the candidate (Druckman et al. 2009). In addition, most congressional primary candidates have a campaign website; from 2018 to 2022, 88% of all major-party, ballot-eligible candidates had one. Among those candidates who do not have a website, almost all are non-competitive candidates who did not raise any money.

As a part of a typical campaign website, candidates for Congress dedicate space to their issue positions. Among candidates who have a website from 2018 to 2022, 85% included an issue platform on their website (Porter et al. 2025). Unlike other communication mediums, such as TV advertisements, candidates are not constrained by space or time on campaign websites (Druckman et al. 2009). Despite this, candidates are still selective about the issues they discuss. On average, candidates will have statements regarding 9 issues on their campaign website. These campaign website issue statements, therefore, capture the strategic issue messaging we are interested in measuring without the resource or space constraints other communication mediums have.

In sum, campaign website issue pages are (1) available for the vast majority of primary election candidates, allowing us to analyze almost all candidates for the U.S. House; (2) devoid of space and time constraints, allowing us to analyze which issues candidates decide to discuss; and (3) constrained by the electoral context, allowing us to analyze how the strategic considerations between both stages influence candidates' issue strategy.

## 5 | Measurement

We now turn to measuring the proportion of a candidate's issue text that is dedicated to each of the three issue strategies: party owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave riding. To do so, we first need to define what issues each party owns and what issues are wave riding issues.

As discussed previously, party owned issues are issues that the American public believes one party is better suited to handle once in office (Egan 2013; Fagan 2019). Given we are interested in issues where ownership is largely stable over time and holds after controlling for contemporaneous factors, we use the same issue ownership categorization used initially by Egan (2013). In this categorization, Republicans are viewed as better suited to handle domestic security, military, immigration, inflation, crime, foreign affairs, and taxes.<sup>6</sup> Democrats are considered better at handling energy, education, jobs, health care, Social Security, environment, and poverty.

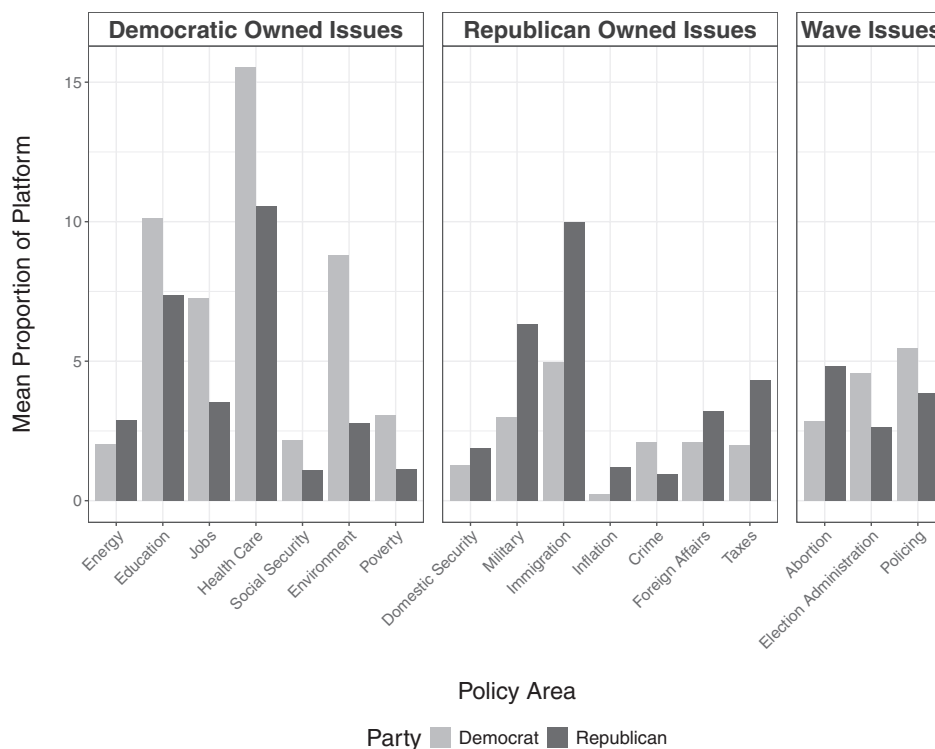
For wave riding issues, we focus on three issues that increased in salience after the 2020 congressional elections: abortion, election integrity, and policing. For abortion, the previous few election cycles had seen an increased focus on the issue, but attention increased prior to the 2022 midterm cycle. In December 2021, 3 months before the first 2022 congressional primary, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. This was the first abortion case to reach the Supreme Court since President Trump nominated three justices to the Court during his time in office.<sup>7</sup> For election integrity, there was a similar rise in salience after the events on January 6, 2021, when protesters stormed the Capitol attempting to overturn the 2020 presidential election result. Meanwhile, toward the end of the 2020 primary calendar, George Floyd's murder and subsequent protests raised the salience of policing as an issue for voters before the 2022 midterms.<sup>8</sup> In addition to our three wave riding issues including events that clearly raised issue salience for the 2022 election, we should highlight that all three issues are non-consensus issues (Egan 2013). While any issue, including those traditionally owned by a party, can become a wave-riding issue when it gains sudden national salience, we specifically focus on salient issues that are not party-owned. Unlike previous studies, this allows us to test the pure wave riding hypothesis by isolating the phenomenon of wave riding from the potentially confounding effects of issue ownership (and subsequently, consensus issues).

The aforementioned seventeen issue areas—seven Republican-owned issues, seven Democratic-owned issues, and three wave-riding issues—constitute the issue topics we are interested in labeling in campaign website issue statements.<sup>9</sup> We first split the text into individual paragraphs to label issue content in candidates' statements.

To label each paragraph for its issue area, we take advantage of recent advancements in large language models, specifically GPT-4, that allow for the high-performing and efficient labeling of political texts (Lee et al. 2025). For our specific application, LLMs are ideally suited to carry out the policy classification of campaign statements. For one, the size of our corpus (approximately 150,000 paragraphs) is too large to hand-label all the data efficiently or at a low cost. Our task also includes a total of twenty policy categories. Because of the number of issue categories, using human labelers would be cognitively intensive and prone to recall errors. Recent evaluations demonstrate that GPT-4 performs exceptionally well on the classification of short political texts, the measurement task we face, often matching or exceeding human coders (Heseltine and Clemm von Hohenberg 2024).

For this task, we use the `promptr` package in R, developed by Ornstein et al. (2025), to label our campaign issue statements using the OpenAI API.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, we prompt GPT-4 to classify each campaign statement paragraph into one of our 20 issue areas or "none." After GPT classified all paragraphs in our dataset, we cleaned the text to ensure that it only contained labels related to our 20 issue areas.<sup>11</sup>

With the labels assigned to each paragraph, we take additional steps to ensure that the model returns labels that reflect



**FIGURE 1** | Mean Proportion of Issue Text Dedicated to Issue Area by Party. The figure plots the mean proportion of candidates' issue text by issue area from 2018 to 2022 broken down by party. Issue areas along the x-axis are faceted by issue type with Democratic issues on the left, Republican issues in the middle panel, and wave riding issues on the right-hand side. Issue ownership is determined according to Egan (2013). The three issues Egan (2013) finds are only weakly owned (economy, the deficit, and trade) are omitted from this figure and from the subsequent analyses.

our issue areas of interest specified in SI A1.1. To validate the classification labels, we labeled 1000 paragraphs according to the instructions specified in SI A1.1. Based on these labels, we calculate Cohen's kappa among the human-generated labels and the GPT-generated labels. The Cohen's kappa between the human-generated labels and the GPT-generated labels is 0.84, which is consistent with prior work performing similar tasks (e.g., Porter et al. 2025) and suggests GPT is reliably capturing the concept of interest.

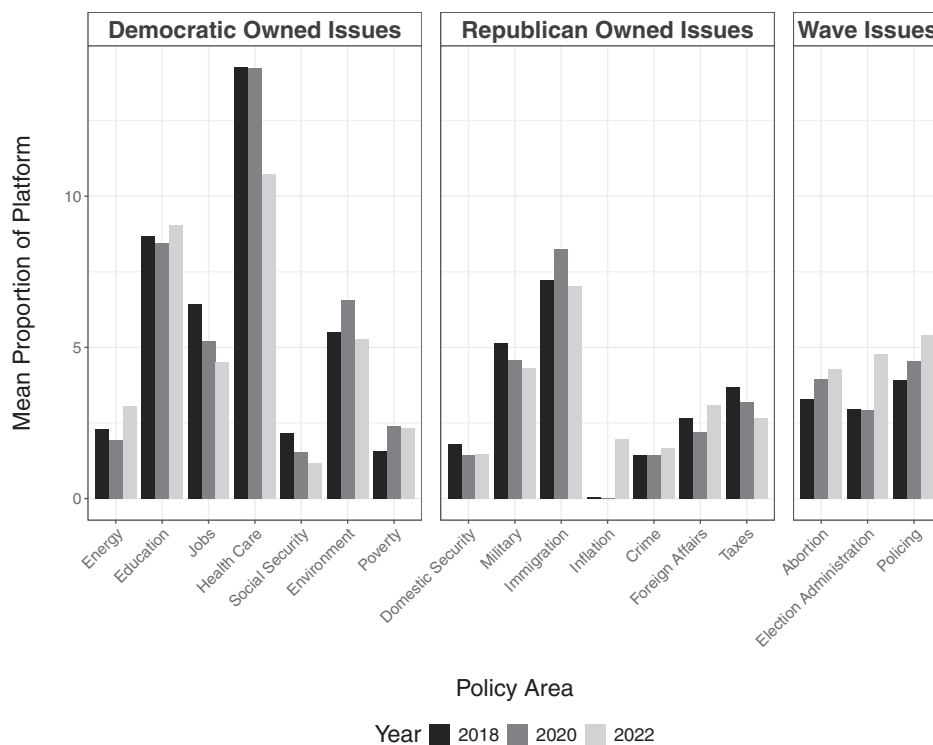
While proprietary large language models do offer better performance for human intelligence tasks, such as labeling documents, there are concerns about the replication of these results that we do take seriously (e.g., Barrie et al. 2024). For instance, we repeat our coding process over time to assess the consistency of the GPT-generated labels in December 2024 and February 2025. We find our results are remarkably consistent, and for this specific task, there is minimal variation from re-running our procedure across time.<sup>12</sup> SI A2.2 reports inter-coder reliability measures between our hand-labeled sample, the December 2024 labels, and the February 2025 labels. We also reproduce all of the results in the main body of our paper using the GPT-4 labels from February 2025 in SI A3.

Using classified issue paragraphs, we can calculate the percentage of a candidate's issue text that is dedicated to a given issue area using word counts. To do this, for a given issue area, we add up the number of words in paragraphs labeled as about that issue area. We then divide that number by the total word count on a candidate's issue page. Figure 1 plots the average

proportion by party for each of our seventeen issue areas. Issue areas along the x-axis are arranged from most Republican owned (left) to most Democratic owned (right), with the three wave riding issues on the right side of the figure. Consistent with prior research, Republican candidates dedicate a higher percentage of their platform than Democrats to issues owned by Republicans. This finding is consistent across issues, with crime being the only exception. In many instances, the proportion of the platform Republican candidates dedicate to Republican owned issues is orders of magnitude larger than the proportion of the platform dedicated by Democrats, including immigration (10% vs. 5%), military (6% vs. 3%), and taxes (4% vs. 2%).

We also find similar patterns among Democrats and their discussion of Democratic-owned issues. Across the seven policy areas voters view as Democratic-owned, Democrats dedicate a higher proportion of their platform, on average, to six of the seven Democratic-owned issues. The lone exception is energy. In many instances, the proportion of the platform that Democrats dedicate to these issues is orders of magnitude larger than Republican candidates. We find particularly large discrepancies on the environment (9% vs. 3%), health care (16% vs. 11%), and jobs (7% vs. 4%).

We also see small partisan differences across 2018 to 2022 among wave riding issues. Republicans, on average, dedicate a higher proportion of their platform to abortion than Democrats (5% vs. 3%). For both election administration and policing, Democrats dedicate a higher proportion to both



**FIGURE 2** | Mean Proportion of Issue Text Dedicated to Issue Area by Year. The figure plots the mean proportion of candidates' issue text by issue area from 2018 to 2022 broken down by year. Issue areas along the x-axis are faceted by issue type with Democratic issues on the left, Republican issues in the middle panel, and wave riding issues on the right-hand side. Issue ownership is determined according to Egan (2013). The three issues Egan (2013) finds are only weakly owned (economy, the deficit, and trade) are omitted from this figure and from the subsequent analyses.

issues than Republicans (5% vs. 3%; 5% vs. 4%). We should note that across all three election years, policing (5%), abortion (4%), and election administration (4%) are the sixth, seventh, and eighth most discussed issues among our seventeen issue areas.

There is substantial variation across years in the amount of attention dedicated to each issue area, suggesting our data captures meaningful changes in campaign issue priorities over time. Figure 2 plots the average proportion of campaign platforms dedicated to each of our twenty policy areas by year. While certain issues are consistent year to year—for example, the amount of platform text dedicated to crime in 2018, 2020, and 2022 respectively deviated <0.3%—others show drastic changes from year to year. Some changes coincided with the presidential election in 2020 and were more discussed in those years (e.g., immigration and the environment). Other issues saw a reduction of salience over time (e.g., healthcare, military, and jobs). We do see an increase in average platform text dedicated to our three-wave riding issues in 2022. For abortion, candidates dedicated just over 4% of platform text in 2022 versus 3% in 2018 and 4% in 2020. Policing exhibited a similar increase in platform discussion across the three elections, going from 4% of platform text in 2018 to 4.5% in 2020 to just over 5% in 2022. Election administration saw the greatest single-year spike of the three issues in 2022, going from 3% of platform text in 2018 and 2020 to 5% of platform text in 2022.

Based on our classified paragraphs, we create three candidate-level measures that capture the percentage of words on each

candidate's platform dedicated to the three issue strategies: party owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave-riding. To do this, we first counted the number of words each candidate uses on her platform. Then, for each paragraph that was classified into one of the seventeen policy areas, we add the number of words in that paragraph to the numerator of the relevant strategy for that candidate.

Descriptively, our results match with overall trends in issue strategies and those seen in Figures 1 and 2. First, candidates are spending more time discussing issues their party owns than issues the other party owns. The average candidate dedicates 38% of their platform to party-owned issues and 23% to issue trespassing. Second, we also find that candidates dedicated more issue attention to wave-riding issues in 2022 than in previous election years. On average, candidates in 2022 dedicated 24% of their platform to our selected wave-riding issues (abortion, election administration, and policing) compared with only 19% of their platform dedicated to these issues from 2018 and 2020. These descriptives are consistent with prior research and demonstrate that candidates engage in all three issue strategies, indicating that campaign website issue statements are a reliable way to gain insight into the issue platforms of candidates not previously studied. It is important to note that party-owned issues, issue trespassing, and the three wave-riding issues we analyze here do not constitute the entire issue space. For example, candidates regularly discuss infrastructure and transportation, issues which are neither party-owned nor especially salient, in their campaign platforms. Our focus is on the relative frequency of engaging in each of

our three issue coverage strategies. In the following section, we analyze the factors that predict when candidates engage in party-owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave riding.

## 6 | Results

We now turn to empirically testing our hypotheses to see how candidate characteristics and the electoral context predict the proportion of a candidate's issue platform dedicated to each of the three campaign strategies: party owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave riding. For each strategy, we fit a fractional logit model predicting the proportion of a candidate's platform text dedicated to the corresponding strategy.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned previously, the numerator of the proportion is the number of words used in paragraphs labeled as issue areas that fall into each of the three issue strategies (party owned issues, issue trespassing, and wave riding). The denominator is the total number of words on a candidate's issue page. Across all models, our primary independent variables of interest are candidate experience, partisan primary, and contested primary. We measure candidate inexperience using a three-level factor variable, taking on values of incumbent, experienced challenger, and inexperienced challenger. For partisan primary, this is a binary variable that is equal to one if a candidate's state holds partisan primary elections (either open, closed, or semi-open/closed) and zero if a candidate's state holds a non-partisan primary (top-two, top-four, or jungle primary).<sup>14</sup> Finally, a contested primary is a binary variable equal to one if another candidate is in the primary and zero if the primary is uncontested. We treat a non-partisan primary with only two candidates as uncontested.

In addition to our independent variables related to our hypotheses, we also control for several additional factors across all three campaign strategies. This includes a candidate's gender (equal to one if a candidate is male; zero otherwise), candidate party (equal to one if a candidate is a Republican; zero if a candidate is a Democrat), and fixed effects by election year.<sup>15</sup> We also include controls for pre-primary campaign fundraising (logged)<sup>16</sup> and the partisanship of a district. We measure this through same-party presidential vote share in the congressional district (averaged across the previous three presidential elections). This allows us to capture the overall partisan leaning and electoral environment of the congressional district, providing a stable indicator of the baseline support candidates can expect from co-partisans in their constituency. We also fit each model for Democratic and Republican candidates separately to examine party-specific patterns.<sup>17</sup> In addition, we also cluster standard errors by congressional race to account for the fact that candidates running in the same district are not independent observations.

Starting with party owned issues, Table 1 presents the results of a negative binomial model predicting the proportion of a candidate's platform text dedicated to party owned issues. In the first column, we include all candidates with a website issue page, and in the second and third columns, we include only Democrats and Republicans, respectively. First, we find support for our hypothesis that experienced candidates and incumbent candidates dedicate a higher proportion of their issue text to party owned issues than inexperienced candidates. From the model in the left column, we find that being an incumbent or an experienced

candidate results in nearly 2 and 3 percentage points more of a platform dedicated to party owned issues when compared with inexperienced candidates, respectively. Both Democratic and Republican candidates with previous elected experience are also more likely to discuss party owned issues, as is shown in the second and third column.

We should note, the results from control variables are consistent with previous findings related to campaign platform strategy. We first find that candidates running in districts with higher same-party presidential vote dedicate a lower proportion of their issue text to party-owned issues. We also find that Republicans dedicate a lower proportion of their issue text to party-owned issues than Democrats. Finally, candidates who receive more pre-primary fundraising are also dedicating a higher proportion of their platform to party-owned issues. This is consistent with our theory that strategic candidates should discuss party-owned issues more.

Next, we turn to assessing what factors predict the proportion of a candidate's platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. For this, we again fit a fractional logit model with the same independent variables as above. Our dependent variable is the proportion of a candidate's issue platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. The results from this model are presented in Table 2. We again fit separate models for all candidates, Democrats, and Republicans.

Starting with candidate experience, we again find support for our expectations. Specifically, incumbent candidates dedicate more of their platform to issue trespassing than inexperienced and experienced challengers ( $p$ -value  $< 0.01$  across all three models). In substantive terms, our model predicts that incumbents dedicate just over 6 percentage points more to issue trespassing than experienced challengers and nearly 5 percentage points more than inexperienced challengers. Consistent with our expectations, we also find that experienced challengers dedicate a lower proportion of their issue text to issue trespassing than inexperienced challengers, a finding which appears to be driven by Republican candidates.

Beyond candidate experience, we also find that primary election dynamics predict the proportion of a candidate's platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. In line with our expectations, we find that candidates running in partisan primaries, and thus first having to win over a subset of partisan voters, dedicate a lower proportion of their issue platform text to issue trespassing, a phenomenon which is particularly true among Republican candidates. In substantive terms, running in a state with partisan primaries results in a nearly 3 percentage point decrease in the proportion of a candidate's platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. Similarly, we also find evidence that members of Congress who face a contested primary dedicate a lower proportion of their platform to issue trespassing, a finding which is again driven by Republican candidates. In substantive terms, candidates facing a primary election opponent dedicate just under 2 percentage points fewer to issue trespassing than candidates running uncontested. In most states, a contested primary means that candidates must appeal to a subset of co-partisan voters. Both of these results point to primary election dynamics shaping candidates' issue messaging strategy.

**TABLE 1** | Predicting proportion of platform text dedicated to party owned issues.

	Dependent variable		
	Proportion of platform text: Party owned issues		
	All candidates	Democrats	Republicans
Experienced challenger	0.125***	0.111**	0.125**
Ref: Inexperienced challenger	(0.035)	(0.045)	(0.053)
Incumbent	0.077**	0.066	0.079
Ref: Inexperienced challenger	(0.032)	(0.043)	(0.049)
Partisan primary	-0.044	-0.029	-0.092
	(0.033)	(0.039)	(0.058)
Contested primary	0.009	-0.025	0.071
	(0.032)	(0.043)	(0.049)
Same party presidential vote	-0.003***	-0.004***	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Fundraising (logged)	0.011***	0.008*	0.014***
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Republican	-0.902***		
	(0.025)		
Male	-0.019	-0.069**	0.059
	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.045)
2020	0.016	0.112***	-0.111**
	(0.028)	(0.036)	(0.046)
2022	0.009	0.042	-0.040
	(0.029)	(0.039)	(0.044)
Constant	-0.006	0.105	-1.050***
	(0.067)	(0.094)	(0.099)
Observations	4670	2324	2346

Note: The table presents the results from a fractional logit model predicting the proportion of a candidate's policy platform text dedicated to party owned issues.

Units of analysis are candidates running as major party candidates in primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives from 2018 to 2022. Republican owned issues are domestic security, military, immigration, inflation, crime, foreign affairs, and taxes. Democrat owned issues are energy, education, jobs, health care, Social Security, environment, and poverty. Standard errors are clustered by congressional race.

\* $p < 0.1$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

As with party owned issues, we also find results related to issue trespassing that are consistent with previous work. For example, the proportion of a candidate's platform text is related to the district partisanship; candidates running in districts with a higher proportion of same-party voters dedicate a lower proportion of their platform text to issue trespassing. We also find that Republicans engage in more issue trespassing.

For our final models, we use a fractional logit model to analyze which candidates engage in more or less wave riding. Our dependent variable is the proportion of a candidate's platform dedicated to our three wave riding issues (abortion, election administration, and policing). Unlike the previous two models, where we were interested in cross-sectional patterns, we

are now interested in candidates' campaign strategy in 2022 relative to 2018 and 2020. This ensures that the results we observe capture which candidates and electoral circumstances are predictive of adopting a higher proportion of platform text to wave riding issues in response to the increased salience of those issues. This also ensures that any patterns we find are not the result of certain types of candidates talking about these issues more prior to the 2022 election. In addition, we also run three models in which we predict the proportion of a candidate's platform dedicated to each wave riding issue separately. This means the dependent variables are the proportion of a candidate's platform dedicated to abortion, election administration, and policing, respectively. In these single-issue models, as with the composite wave riding measure, we are interested

**TABLE 2** | Predicting proportion of platform text dedicated to issue trespassing.

	Dependent variable		
	Proportion of platform text: Issue trespassing		
	All candidates	Democrats	Republicans
Experienced challenger	-0.108**	-0.071	-0.123**
Ref: Inexperienced challenger	(0.043)	(0.061)	(0.057)
Incumbent	0.253***	0.166***	0.305***
Ref: Inexperienced challenger	(0.041)	(0.059)	(0.053)
Partisan primary	-0.149***	-0.051	-0.135**
	(0.040)	(0.051)	(0.065)
Contested primary	-0.092**	-0.006	-0.145***
	(0.039)	(0.056)	(0.052)
Same party presidential vote	-0.003**	0.005***	-0.008***
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Fundraising (logged)	-0.005	0.001	-0.005
	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Republican	0.835***		
	(0.030)		
Male	-0.032	0.052	-0.083*
	(0.030)	(0.037)	(0.047)
2020	-0.074**	-0.143***	-0.036
	(0.033)	(0.048)	(0.047)
2022	-0.208***	-0.217***	-0.223***
	(0.034)	(0.053)	(0.047)
Constant	-1.232***	-1.874***	-0.041
	(0.084)	(0.131)	(0.105)
Observations	4670	2324	2346

Note: The table presents the results from a fractional logit model predicting the proportion of a candidate's policy platform text dedicated to issue trespassing. Units of analysis are candidates running as major party candidates in primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives from 2018 to 2022. Democratic issue trespassing is discussions of domestic security, military, immigration, inflation, crime, foreign affairs, and taxes. Republican issue trespassing is discussions of energy, education, jobs, health care, Social Security, environment, and poverty. Standard errors are clustered by congressional race.

\* $p < 0.1$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

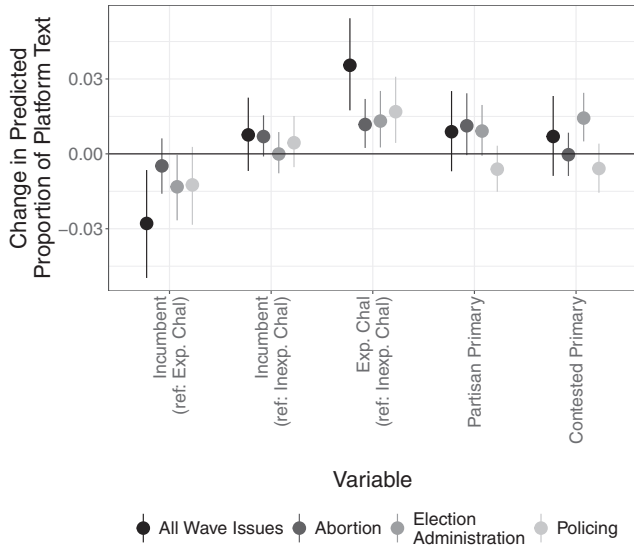
\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

in capturing candidates' campaign strategy in 2022 relative to 2018 and 2020.

To do this, we interact candidate experience, primary type, and contested primary with a binary variable for 2022. Our hypotheses related to wave riding are specifically focused on the coefficient for the interaction terms. The interaction term in this model reflects how much more the coefficient of interest increases or decreases as the salience of abortion, election administration, and policing increase for the 2022 election. In substantive terms, a positive (negative) coefficient can be interpreted as candidates being more (less) responsive to issues increasing in salience in 2022, and thus candidates engaging in a higher (lower) proportion of wave riding. In addition to

these interactions, we also control for the same independent variables as Tables 1 and 2. For presentation purposes, we present the change in predicted proportion from the interaction terms between 2022 and candidate experience, partisan primary, and contested primary, respectively. Full model results are available in SI A8. Figures 3 and 4 present the interaction effects from the negative binomial model among all candidates (Figure 3) and broken down by Democrats and Republicans (Figure 4).

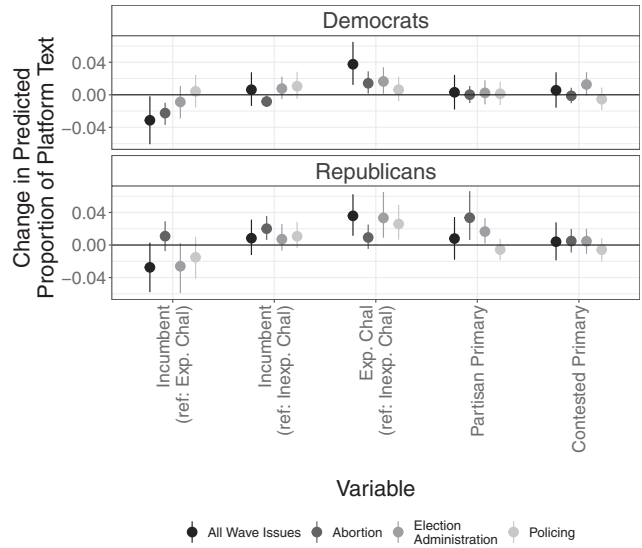
First, we find support for our hypothesis that wave riding differs between challenger candidates and incumbents. Among all candidates, incumbents dedicate a lower proportion of their issue platform to wave riding issues than experienced challengers,



**FIGURE 3** | Wave Riding Interaction Effects, All Candidates. The figure plots the interactive effects between 2022 and our variables of interest as a change in predicted proportion of platform text dedicated to wave riding along with 90% confidence intervals. Predicted proportions are generated using an observed values approach using 10,000 simulated beta values. Coefficient values can be interpreted as the extent to which candidates are responsive to increased issue salience in 2022 and dedicate a higher proportion of their platform text to wave riding issues in 2022. Positive (negative) values indicate that candidates are engaging in relatively more (less) wave riding in their issue rhetoric. Full model results generating these findings can be found in SI A8.

although there is no statistically significant difference between incumbents and inexperienced challengers. We also find support that wave riding differs by candidate experience. Experienced challengers are more responsive to wave riding issues than inexperienced challengers ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  in model with all three wave riding issues and in issue specific models). These findings related to candidate experience are also largely replicated when analyzing Democratic and Republican candidates separately (Figure 4).

When turning to primary election dynamics, we find mixed evidence that primary election factors shape candidates' responses to wave riding issues. While the composite model with all three wave riding issues fails to demonstrate support for our hypothesis that candidates who must appeal to a partisan primary electorate will devote more text to wave riding, we find some differences when examining each wave riding issue separately and when evaluating candidates by party. In terms of primary type, Republican candidates running in partisan primary states engage in more wave riding than candidates running in non-partisan primary states for certain issues, although these effects do not appear to exist among Democratic candidates ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  for abortion among Republicans;  $p$ -value  $< 0.1$  for election administration among Republicans). We also see candidates facing off in a contested primary engaging in wave riding on the issue of election administration more than candidates who are running uncontested ( $p$ -value  $< 0.5$  in election administration model for all candidates). While the evidence here is mixed depending on which wave riding issues we model, it does point to candidates responding to primary election factors. If candidates



**FIGURE 4** | Wave Riding Interaction Effects, by Party. The figure plots the interactive effects between 2022 and our variables of interest as a change in predicted proportion of platform text dedicated to wave riding along with 90% confidence intervals, broken down by candidate partisanship. Predicted proportions are generated using an observed values approach using 10,000 simulated beta values. Coefficient values can be interpreted as the extent to which candidates are responsive to increased issue salience in 2022 and dedicate a higher proportion of their platform text to wave riding issues in 2022. Positive (negative) values indicate that candidates are engaging in relatively more (less) wave riding in their issue rhetoric. Full model results generating these findings can be found in SI A8.

first need to win over primary election voters, either due to a partisan primary election or a contested primary, they are more responsive to wave riding issues in their issue messaging strategy.

## 7 | Discussion

This paper contributes to the literature on campaign communication and strategy by conducting a systematic analysis of three different methods candidates use when deciding what issues to highlight during their congressional campaigns. We demonstrate that the strategies of focusing on party owned issues, trespassing on issues owned by the opposing party, and riding the wave by addressing timely and salient issues are highly prevalent messaging strategies that candidates engage in with regularity. Of congressional candidates who had a dedicated issue platform on their campaign website between 2018 and 2022, these candidates spent an average of 91%–95% of their issue platform engaged in these three strategies. Furthermore, we demonstrate that candidate characteristics, particularly previous political experience, and primary election dynamics are associated with the extent to which candidates employ each of these three strategies. Incumbent candidates dedicate more of their issue platform to party owned issues and issues owned by the opposing party than do challenger candidates. Challenger candidates with previous political experience discuss party owned issues and wave riding issues but avoid issue trespassing more than challengers without previous political experience. We also find evidence

suggesting the dynamics of the primary election contest influence how much candidates engage in these three strategies. In particular, candidates who must appeal to voters in an intra-party contest are less likely to issue trespass and emphasize issues for which their party is perceived as weaker.

Additionally, candidate characteristics and primary election dynamics are differentially associated with the extent to which candidates discuss individual wave riding issues. Among challengers, those with previous political experience are more likely to engage in wave riding and emphasize the issues of abortion and policing in 2022, but this is not true for the issue of election administration. However, candidates appear to be responsive to primary election dynamics when deciding whether to wave ride on the issue of election administration. This suggests that there are some issues for which candidate experience appears to play a more important role (abortion, policing) and others for which primary dynamics exercise a larger influence (election administration). Overall, this highlights that strategic wave riding varies by issue area, and future research should investigate the conditions under which candidates choose to lean into wave riding issues as they become nationally salient.

Furthermore, we focus our attention on primary elections, an increasingly important aspect of the electoral process that remains understudied. In the United States, an overwhelming number of congressional districts are drawn such that they are reliably won by one party or the other. In districts such as these, the locus of competition shifts from the general election to the primary election. In primary elections, candidates seek to distinguish themselves from other same-party candidates. One of the key ways candidates can accomplish this is through their issue messaging strategies. We demonstrate that candidates in congressional primaries, looking to set themselves apart from other partisans, leverage their distinct advantages, such as their political background, in crafting their issue agendas. Of course, there is much more to explore related to issue messaging in primary elections. Evaluating how individual candidates engage in issue messaging raises questions about how the specific dynamics of each individual primary election contest influence the prevalence of these three issue messaging strategies. In other words, how does the campaign dialogue relate to these three issue messaging strategies? If one candidate in a primary election focuses on wave riding issues, do the other candidates in that contest also focus on wave riding issues? Additionally, evaluating how differences in issue salience across districts influence the adoption of these strategies in primary election campaigns provides an area for future analysis.

Ultimately, understanding how candidates campaign in primary elections is crucial for understanding electoral outcomes. In an increasing number of districts, winning the primary election is akin to winning a seat in Congress. In primary elections, where partisan cues are often uninformative and competition is intraparty rather than interparty, understanding issue messaging strategies becomes especially important. How candidates lean into party-owned issues, trespass on issues, and ride the wave reveals how candidates attempt to differentiate themselves on the campaign trail; however, these choices may also have downstream consequences as these candidates are likely to pursue their campaign priorities if elected to office (Sulkin 2011).

Ultimately, understanding the strategic choices candidates make in primary contests is essential to understanding electoral outcomes and how these legislators behave once in office.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Banda (2015) examined issue formation in congressional primaries, but the data is from 2008 and prior when electoral circumstances differed in important ways from today's.
- <sup>2</sup> Cook PVI creates an *ex-ante* index of competitiveness based on how strongly the district leans to the Democratic or Republican party compared to the nation as a whole. PVI is calculated by comparing a congressional district's average Democratic or Republican party share of the presidential vote in the last two presidential elections to the national average share of those elections. A district is defined as "competitive" when it falls within the R + 3 to D + 3 range.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, recent work shows that Donald Trump's endorsement can provide a boost for Republican primary candidates while also potentially carrying negative implications for endorsed candidates in general elections (Manento and Testa 2022; Ballard et al. 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> One potential concern is that issue trespassing may be driven by candidates engaging in negative campaigning and criticizing the opposing party (e.g., Lau and Pomper 2001). As shown in SI A4.1, this does not appear to be the case. Candidates are significantly more likely to use bipartisan rhetoric when issue trespassing than when discussing issues owned by their party ( $p$ -value < 0.001), thereby suggesting that issue trespassing is distinct from negative campaigning.
- <sup>5</sup> Candidate campaign websites were collected by research assistants in the two weeks preceding a state's primary election. Data collection occurred after the candidate filing deadline, ensuring that all ballot-eligible candidates with campaign websites were included. For a detailed explanation of the data collection process, see Porter et al. (2025).
- <sup>6</sup> We exclude three issues that are weakly owned by the Republican Party: the economy, trade, and the deficit. Previous work has defined these issues as performance issues (Petrocik 1996) and demonstrated that ownership has shifted over time (Egan 2013). Our results in the following section are largely consistent when we include these issues as being Republican-owned.
- <sup>7</sup> The salience of this issue was further increased on May 2, 2022, when a draft decision was leaked that suggested the Court would overturn *Roe v. Wade* (1973). At the time when the draft was leaked, only Texas had held a primary election. As a result, both events raised the relative salience of abortion in the 2022 primary elections.
- <sup>8</sup> While Floyd's death and subsequent protests occurred in the middle of the 2020 primary election calendar, 11 states had already held their primary elections before May 25. An additional 18 states held their congressional primaries within a month of Floyd's death. So, while the events that increased the salience of policing did occur during the 2020 election cycle, we do expect these events to affect 2022 candidates more fully than 2020 candidates.
- <sup>9</sup> While we choose to exclude the weakly Republican-owned, performance issues (economy, trade, and the deficit), we still classify candidate statements into all party owned issue areas. This results in twenty total categories (17 party owned and three wave riding). A full description of our twenty policy areas can be found in SI A1.1.
- <sup>10</sup> A more robust description of our coding and validation procedure, including our specific prompting language, can be found in SI A2: LLM Procedure and Validation.

- <sup>11</sup> In less than 0.5% of paragraphs, GPT returned tokens that were neither one of our policy areas nor “none.” In those cases, we converted these tokens to “none.”
- <sup>12</sup> It is important to note that at the time of coding these data, GPT-5 had not yet been released. While it might be tempting to re-estimate all models using the newest version, such a step is unnecessary. As Bisbee and Spirling (2025) emphasize, satisfactory model performance is often more important than using the most state-of-the-art architecture. Moreover, preliminary benchmarking suggests that GPT-4 and GPT-5 produce highly similar outputs on structured text classification tasks, such as political text annotation, indicating that results derived from GPT-4 are unlikely to differ meaningfully from those that would be obtained using GPT-5.
- <sup>13</sup> We also reproduce the main analyses using OLS regression instead of a fractional logit model. In SI A5, we show the results are consistent when estimated with OLS.
- <sup>14</sup> We choose to treat open primaries, closed primaries, and partially open/closed primaries as a single “partisan primary” variable. In SI A6, we show the effect is consistent when considering different types of partisan primaries separately.
- <sup>15</sup> We also re-estimate all models including only candidates from the 2018 and 2022 primary elections. Given 2020 was a presidential election year and the beginning of the primary election season was marked by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, we treat it as a potential outlier. Our results remain unchanged whether candidates running in 2020 are included or excluded.
- <sup>16</sup> Data on candidate fundraising comes from Bonica (2024). Given that we are focused on issue messaging strategies in congressional primary elections, we use a measure of candidate fundraising from before a candidate’s primary election occurs. This isolates candidate viability at the primary stage, avoiding conflation with funds raised after winning the primary—when viability has already been demonstrated. We take the natural log of pre-primary fundraising; for candidates who report raising no funds, we assign a value of 0.
- <sup>17</sup> We do not include a variable for ideological extremity, such as CFScores in the main analyses. While we believe there is a relationship between candidate ideology and discussion of issues, using CFScores limits our sample of primary candidates to only those who raised money from donors who gave to multiple candidates. Inclusion of CFScores produces results that are consistent with those presented in the body of the paper. Complete model results controlling for CFScores are included in section SI A7 of the appendix.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table A2.2.** Classification validation, Cohen's kappa. **Table A3.1.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to party owned issues, February 2025 GPT-4 labels. **Table A3.2.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to issue trespassing, February 2025 GPT-4 labels. **Table A3.3.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated wave riding, February 2025 GPT-4 labels (all candidates). **Figure A4.1.** Use of bipartisan language by party and issue type. **Table A5.1.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to party owned issues, OLS. **Table A5.2.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to issue trespassing, OLS. **Table A5.3.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated wave riding, OLS (all candidates). **Table A6.1.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to party owned issues, alternate partisan primary coding. **Table A6.2.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to issue trespassing, alternate partisan primary coding. **Table A6.3.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to wave riding, alternate partisan primary coding. **Table A7.1.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to party owned issues, ideological extremism control. **Table A7.2.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated to issue trespassing, ideological extremism control. **Table A7.3.** Predicting proportion of platform dedicated wave riding, ideological extremism control (all candidates). **Table A8.1.** Predicting the proportion of platform text dedicated to wave riding issues, all candidates. **Table A8.2.** Predicting the proportion of platform text dedicated to wave riding issues, democrats. **Table A8.3.** Predicting the proportion of platform text dedicated to wave riding issues, republicans.