

The Effect of Grassroots Campaigning on Issue Preferences and Issue Saliency

Kevin Arceneaux
Assistant Professor
215.204.6950

kevin.arceneaux@temple.edu

Robin Kolodny
Associate Professor
215.204.7709

rkolodny@temple.edu

Department of Political Science
Temple University
Gladfelter Hall, 4th Floor
1115 W. Berks Street
Philadelphia, PA 19122

Abstract

What effect, if any, do personally delivered campaign messages have on political attitudes? Recent evidence suggests that these messages can affect voting behavior, but not issue opinions (Arceneaux 2007). However, this study only considered the effect of campaign messages on popular valiance issues. We critique and extend this work by considering the effect of electioneering on contested position issues. Drawing on a large scale randomized field experiment, we show that personally delivered campaign messages can influence people issue attitudes and issue priorities, but only on emerging issues. Furthermore, we find that people are able to resist persuasive messages that are inconsistent with their value preferences.

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Contrary to early claims that political advertising has “minimal effects” (e.g., Atkin and Heald 1976; Patterson and McClure 1976), mounting evidence strongly suggests that mass political advertising can both alter people’s political attitudes and focus their attention on particular issues (Gerber, et al. 2006; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004). These recent studies have uncovered the persuasive effects of advertising through rigorous research designs that capture variation in the partisan balance of advertising and more accurately measure causal effects with a natural experiment (Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004) or a randomized field experiment (Gerber, et al. 2006).

Although it would be difficult to detect from studies of advertising, political parties spend millions of dollars and devote massive amounts of manpower to grassroots campaigning, such as door-to-door canvassing and phone calls. In the 2000 presidential election, for example, the national party organizations spent only 25 percent less on grassroots campaigning than mass media advertising and the local party organizations spent 7.5 times more on electioneering than mass advertising (La Raja and Jarvis-Shean 2001). Yet despite advances in understanding the persuasive effects of mass political advertising, little is still know about the effect that more direct forms of campaigning have on political attitudes. To date, only a handful of rigorous studies have been published on the subject (Arceneaux 2007; Gerber 2004; Nickerson 2005).

In a wide ranging study, Arceneaux (2007) finds evidence that grassroots campaigning can influence voting decisions but finds scant evidence that personal contact from a campaign worker affects citizens’ attitudes about political issues. While it is possible that personal contact influences voting decisions by altering how much voters like a candidate without affecting their underlying issue opinions, we think such a conclusion is premature. First, Arceneaux focuses on citizens’ beliefs about the candidates’ issue positions, which likely offers a weak test of

persuasion effects. To the extent that citizens construct evaluations of candidates through an on-line process, voters may discard information about a candidate – such as her issue positions – once they have used it to update their evaluation of the candidate (cf. Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). So, it is possible that the personally delivered campaign appeals do influence voters' beliefs about the candidate, but by Election Day, these effects have been fully absorbed into the voting decision.

Second, even if Arceneaux had attempted to gauge the effect of campaign contact on voters' issue attitudes, the campaign he studied only made appeals on *valence* issues (cf. Stokes 1963). Because most voters agree on valence issues, there are many left to persuade. After all, who doesn't prefer economic growth, crime reduction, and water conservation? In contrast, we expect that there will be more evidence of persuasion with respect to *position* issues. These issues are defined by their lack of consensus. As contested policy solutions, position issues lend themselves to argumentation. It is possible that an appeal may convince people to support or oppose budget cuts, support or oppose gun control, or support or oppose zoning restrictions.

Nevertheless, the degree to which people can be swayed on position issues varies. On some issues, people possess strong, well-formed, crystallized attitudes, making it unlikely that a persuasive argument can do much to change their minds (Converse 1964). It is opinions on less well-defined issues that we expect to see the greatest potential for attitude change. Citizens simply have not given much thought to novel or complex issues. They lack the stable store of considerations on these issues than they have on more crystallized issues. Consequently, a persuasive message is more likely to alter the balance of available considerations and lead to attitude change when it addresses a less crystallized issue (Zaller 1992). On a related point, citizens are more likely to reject persuasive arguments that conflict underlying predispositions

(Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Zaller 1992). Even if the message targets a specific less-crystallized issue, citizens are more likely to accept arguments that are in line with their attitudes on the general issue area (pro-attitudinal arguments), and are more likely to reject arguments that contravene their predispositions (counter-attitudinal arguments) (Kam 2005; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

In this project, we investigate whether these personal styles of campaigning affect people's political attitudes and sense of issue priorities. We draw on a randomized field experiment conducted in two statehouse districts located in Southeast Pennsylvania during the 2006 midterm election. The group with which we worked canvassed or called (based on random assignment) suburban households. In their conversations with subjects, canvassers highlighted attempts by conservatives to limit access to birth control, which allows us to gauge the effects of personally delivered campaign messages on attitudes about an emerging position issue as well as to test the hypotheses we discussed above.

Experimental Design

Background

Pennsylvania Politics in 2006

The 2006 elections were competitive on a national scale. However, since Pennsylvania has always been tightly contested statewide, expectations ran high that the Democrats might gain control of one chamber of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, the House of Representatives. The top of the ticket found Democratic incumbent Governor Ed Rendell running for reelection and Democratic US Senate candidate Bob Casey, Jr. polling comfortably ahead of incumbent Republican Senator Rick Santorum. The state legislative elections had the added dimension of a highly public “scandal” – the pay raise lawmakers first approved in the summer of 2005 and later

rescinded. The political damage was done to members of both parties, since support for the pay raise was bipartisan. Indeed 15 incumbents were defeated in the May 2006 primaries, 11 Republicans and four Democrats (Jacobson 2006). Going into this election, Democrats needed to pick up eight seats statewide to control the lower chamber.

Swing Districts in Southeastern Pennsylvania

On primary day in May 2006, a special election was held in Chester County (west of Philadelphia) to fill a vacancy in a state Senate seat caused by the death of the incumbent Republican. The Democratic candidate, County Commissioner Andrew Dinniman defeated Republican Carol Aichele by a 13 point margin in a highly Republican district. Indeed, the seat had been Republican since the Civil War. This victory directed the attention of parties and interest groups to the entire southeastern region for opportunities to expand their ranks (Petersen 2006). The 156th House district (in Chester County and overlapping with the 19th Senate district) and the 161st House district (in neighboring Delaware County) were especially attractive.

The 156th District. Jeff Price of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* explains that the district of retiring Republican Representative Elinor Z. Taylor had voter registration of 20,941 Republicans, 12,185 Democrats and 6,236 who cited no affiliation. The candidates in this open seat race were Republican Shannon Royer and Democrat Barbara McIlvaine Smith. Royer was a West Chester Borough Councilman and long time legislative staffer, first for Congressman Bob Walker in the 1990s and just before this campaign, served as the regional coordinator for the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Smith was also a member of the West Chester Borough Council, as well as an educator and activist in the area who had previously announced her intention to retire from politics. She was recruited to make this race.

On election night, the results of this particular race were too close to call. It took over a month of recounts before Democrat Smith was declared the winner by 28 votes on December 21, 2006. The outcome of this race, together with seven others previously decided, determined that the Democrats would have the majority in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

The 161st District. This district's dynamic was quite different, as Democratic challenger Bryan Lentz took on 28 year Republican incumbent Tom Gannon. This district is in Delaware County, and had proven safe for Rep. Gannon since 1978. Gannon voted for the unpopular pay raise, though he later backed its repeal. Lentz, a former prosecutor and Iraq war veteran, presented himself as a mainstream Democratic alternative. Lentz proved to be a strong candidate from the start and was quick to line up support from a variety of interest groups. However, the dynamic shifted clearly toward Lentz in late September in response to an ad run by the House Republican Campaign Committee alleging that Lentz, as a defense attorney, "helped" put a child predator back on the street (Schaeffer 2006). The ad was roundly criticized and the race became extremely close after that. On Election Day, Lentz beat Gannon by 820 votes out of 27,870 cast.

Subjects and Protocol

In the fall of 2006, we conducted a field experiment with the help of a well-known liberal issue advocacy group that focuses on women's issues. The group endorsed the Democratic candidates in both these competitive statehouse races, and deployed campaign workers to canvass the districts on behalf of the Democratic candidates. The group selected 67,076 individuals from 39,595 households from the registered voter file whom it believed could be persuaded to support their preferred candidate. Its target universe consisted of over 24,000 registered Democrats and approximately 11,000 unaffiliated voters, nearly 32,000 registered Republicans (22,000 females and 10,000 males, or individuals who did not list their sex but vote

infrequently). The group chose to contact female and infrequently voting Republicans, because it surmised that these Republicans may be more sympathetic to liberal stances on women's issues, such as access to birth control and abortion and thus, open to supporting Democratic candidates.

We randomly assigned households into one of three experimental conditions. Subjects in the first condition were slated to receive door-to-door canvassing, those in the second group were slated to receive only a phone call, and subjects in the third group were assigned to receive no contact (see Table 1a).¹ A randomization check confirmed that the available covariates in the voter file (age, party registration, household size, sex, precinct, and voter history) do not jointly predict experimental assignment (District 156: no phone number listed, $\chi^2[47] = 43.49$, $p = 0.619$, phone number listed, $\chi^2[235] = 230.98$, $p = 0.562$; District 161: no phone number listed, $\chi^2[61] = 55.24$, $p = 0.684$, phone number listed, $\chi^2[310] = 302.06$, $p = 0.616$).²

[Insert Table 1 about here]

After the election, we hired a reputable survey research firm to conduct a survey of a random sample of subjects from all of the experimental conditions in both districts. From each target population we randomly sampled 12,000 households with phone numbers listed in the voter file, of which 2,000 completed interviews (1,000 in each district; see Table 1b). After removing non-eligible phone numbers from the sample (e.g., fax line or business number) the response rate is 30.6 percent, which is in line with the performance of current-day telephone surveys.³ Because we were unable to survey everyone in our sample, the generalizability of our results is necessarily restricted to the population of individuals who take telephone surveys.

¹ Some subjects in the door-to-door canvassing condition were assigned to receive a follow-up phone call, but the additional phone call did not have perceptible effects on candidate preferences.

² We regressed treatment assignment on the covariates using multinomial logit in order to obtain these quantities. The randomization check is split between listed and unlisted phone number samples, because we stratified the randomization by whether the voter file recorded a phone number for the household.

³ The response rate was calculated using AAPOR definition 1, which is the most conservative (AAPOR 2006).

Although this is not ideal, analyses of observational survey data are subject to the same limitation on generalizability. The advantage of our study over an observational one is that the incomplete response rate does not adversely affect the internal validity of the study.

Randomization checks for the survey data show that available covariates do not jointly predict experimental assignment (District 156: $\chi^2[230] = 210.78, p = 0.814$; District 161: $\chi^2[295] = 294.37, p = 0.499$). Moreover, the response rates do not differ significantly across experimental groups, demonstrating (as one would expect with randomly assigned groups) that the same proportion of survey-takers existed in each of the groups (District 156: $\chi^2[5] = 3.11, p = 0.684$; District 161: $\chi^2[5] = 3.53, p = 0.619$).

The group paid canvassers and phone callers to work from the same script. Following standard protocol in partisan grassroots operations, campaign workers first asked treatment group contacts to identify the issue (or issues) they saw as the most important and followed by asking how important they viewed “protecting access to family planning services.” The third and final question asked contacts which statehouse candidate they would vote for “if the election were held today.” If the contact said that protecting access to family planning was important to them (and they did not overtly express opposition), campaign workers concluded the contact by reading the following endorsement of the Democratic candidates. Note that the group did not actually mention the partisan label of the candidates it endorsed.

Okay, thanks for answering those questions. Just to let you know, [GROUP] has endorsed (Bryan Lentz/Barbara McIlvaine Smith) because of (his/her) stance on access to birth control, cervical cancer screenings, mammogram services, and his/her support for reproductive healthcare rights. *(If they say: Does that mean (he/she) supports abortion?)*

*Answer: It's my understanding that (he/she) has expressed the right to choose abortion, though that is not (his/her) top priority.)*⁴

This message is well suited to test the hypotheses we developed above. It directly addresses an emerging position issue (birth control) that is connected with a position issue that has been a stable aspect of party politics for the past 20 years (abortion). Furthermore, abortion attitudes tend to be both a central and crystallized idea element in belief systems (Abramowitz 1995), and a polarizing issue split along partisan lines (Adams 1997). Consequently, this stimulus affords us the opportunity to gauge the extent to which campaign messages can affect attitudes on established and emerging issues.

Measures

Respondents answered a number of attitudinal questions on the post-election survey, which provide measures for our dependent variables. We used the standard question wording to measure subjects' abortion and birth control attitudes. For abortion, respondents were asked, "Would you like to see the government and the courts make it harder to get an abortion than it is now, make it easier to get an abortion than it is now, or leave the ability to get an abortion the same as it is now?" And, for birth control, we used the same question wording but substituted "birth control" for "abortion." On both questions, interviewers randomized whether they said "harder" or "easier" first. In the analysis that follows, we code a "harder" response as -1, a

⁴ All door-to-door canvassers worked from this script. Phone bank callers were randomly assigned to read either this script or one very similar. There are no consistent significant differences in effects between the two scripts. Consequently, we do not make a distinction between the scripts in the analyses reported here. The alternate script read:

Okay, thanks for answering those questions. Just to let you know, [GROUP] has endorsed (Bryan Lentz/McIlvaine Smith) because (he/she) believes the current attacks on birth control and reproductive healthcare must stop. (Bryan Lentz/McIlvaine Smith) will work on behalf of Pennsylvania families to keep government intrusion out of personal healthcare decisions. *(If they say: Does that mean (he/she) supports abortion? Answer: It's my understanding that (he/she) has expressed the right to choose abortion, though that is not (hi/her)s top priority.)*

“same” response as 0, and an “easier” response as +1. In addition, we also measured how much importance subjects placed on birth control as an issue by asking respondents after the birth control question, “How important is this issue to you? Very important, important, somewhat important, or not at all important.” We code “not at all important” as 0, “somewhat important” as 1, “important” as 2, and “very important” as 3.⁵ We also measured respondents’ partisanship by asking the standard question, “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or what?” Subjects’ demographic information (age, gender, and geographic location) was taken from the official voter file.

Findings

We estimate the effect of the campaign message on abortion and birth control attitudes by regressing post-study measures of these attitudes on indicators for assignment to the canvassing and phone groups. Because these indicators measure random assignment to the group and not exposure to the message, the regression coefficient associated with each indicator is an unbiased estimate of the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect. The ITT effect tells us the overall effect of the campaign message on the target population – including those who received the message and those who did not. It is a simple matter to estimate the average treatment effect (ATE) among those exposed to the message by using random assignment as an instrument for exposure in a two-stage model (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1996). Unfortunately, the campaign did not systematically collect data on which households were exposed to the message, making it impossible to estimate the ATE. This is not an uncommon aspect of field experiments where one cannot observe exposure (e.g., television advertisements or direct mail messages), and does not pose a problem to obtaining unbiased estimates of the ITT effect.

⁵ Responses were also asked to rate the importance of the abortion issue. As we find with respect to abortion attitudes, the campaign message did little to affect respondents’ subjective assessment of the issue’s importance.

Because our dependent variables are measured on ordinal scales, we use an ordered probit regression model to estimate the ITT effects. In order to improve the fit of the regression models and, thus, the efficiency of the standard errors, we include covariates that may be related to abortion and birth control attitudes: age, gender, indicators for partisanship, and a dummy variable for whether the respondent lived in the 156th district. Since canvassing and phone calls were randomly assigned, the inclusion (or exclusion) of these covariates does not affect the point estimates of the ITT effects.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The results for the abortion attitudes model are shown in the first column of Table 2. As we anticipated, the campaign message had little effect on subjects' abortion attitudes. Both canvassing and phone calls had miniscule and statistically insignificant effects on the likelihood that subjects in the treatment group expressed a pro-choice attitude ($z = 0.65$ for canvassing and $z = 0.77$ for phone calls). Unsurprisingly, abortion attitudes are strongly associated with partisanship. As a polarizing issue, Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to support abortion rights, while Independents fall in between.

Next, we test the hypothesis that campaign messages are capable of influencing attitudes on less polarized aspects of the abortion debate as long as the message is consistent with the recipients underlying abortion preferences. We accomplish this by regressing birth control preferences on the treatment indicators and interactions between treatment indicators and subjects' abortion attitudes. These results are reported in the second column of Table 2. The statistically significant interaction between canvassing and abortion attitudes support the hypothesis that the effect of the campaign message, as delivered via door-to-door canvassing, is moderated by people's abortion predispositions. As illustrated in Figure 1, treatment group

subjects who are supportive of abortion rights – those who want access to abortion to remain the same or made easier – are more likely to support making access to birth control easier by nearly 10 percentage points relative to subjects with the same abortion attitude in the control group. Conversely, among subjects who want the government to restrict access to abortion, the campaign message had no statistically significant effect on their birth control attitudes, and if anything, may have actually lead these subjects to adopt a less liberal opinion on birth control. In short, the campaign message led some individuals see the connection between birth control access and abortion rights, helping them bring their preference on the government regulation of birth control with their attitude on abortion.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

We also estimated the effect of the campaign message on subjects' issue priorities (see column 3 of Table 2). Again, the data support the hypothesis that people's abortion predispositions moderate the effect of the campaign messages on how importance subjects view the birth control issue, as delivered by both the door-to-door canvassers and phone bank callers. Subjects in the canvassing treatment group who are supportive of abortion rights, for instance, are more likely to view birth control as an important issue relative to abortion supporters in the control group (see Figure 2). Abortion foes in the treatment group, on the other hand, were if anything, less likely than abortion foes in the control group to view birth control as an important issue, although this negative effect is not statistically significant.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

It is less clear whether one message delivery method is more effective than the other. With respect to birth control attitudes, the door-to-door canvassers influenced the attitudes of pro-choice subjects, while the phone bank had no statistically significant affect on subjects' birth

control attitudes. Unsurprisingly, a post-hoc test confirms that the ITT effect for the canvassing group is statistically different from the ITT effect for the phone group ($z = 4.38, p < 0.001$).

With respect to issue priorities, both canvassing and phone calls had a positive effect among pro-choice subjects, but canvassing appears to have had a somewhat stronger effect. However, the difference in effects between the canvassing and phone treatment groups is just outside the upper bounds of conventional significance ($z = 1.56, p = 0.118$). Consequently, there is suggestive but not conclusive evidence that a campaign message delivered through door-to-door canvassing has a more influential impact on attitude formation than the same message delivered through phone calls.

Conclusion

These findings offer some clues about the conditions under which personally delivered campaign messages can influence people's issue attitudes, helping bring some clarity to a burgeoning field of study. We add to previous work that suggests campaign messages are unable to affect people's opinions about valence issues (Arceneaux 2007) by demonstrating that campaign messages also do little to affect attitudes on polarized issues. People's attitudes on these types of issues are likely to be crystallized and firm, limiting the effect of persuasive communication. Yet this does not mean that campaigns cannot seek to influence people's attitudes on issues related to a polarized debate. The data support the interpretation that personally delivered campaign messages can move attitudes on less visible issues, and thus, those on which people likely have less crystallized attitudes.

Nevertheless, campaigns do not have a free hand in influencing people's opinions on emerging issues. Our findings suggest that people are able to resist counter-attitudinal messages on a peripheral issue (e.g., birth control) that are inconsistent with their more crystallized attitude

on the central issue (e.g., abortion), while accepting pro-attitudinal messages. This finding is consistent with evidence from laboratory settings that people are able to systematically weigh persuasive arguments and resist those that conflict with their values (e.g., Druckman 2004; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Consequently, we suspect that when campaigns attempt to reframe a polarized position issue by targeting issues that are less central to the debate, they will succeed – at least in the long run – of simply making the peripheral issues more central and, therefore, just as polarizing as the original issue.

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Table 1: Random Assignment by District**a. Target Population**

Experimental Condition	District 156		District 161	
	Number of Households	Number of Individuals	Number of Households	Number of Individuals
Door-to-Door Canvass	12,515	20,441	12,833	22,768
Phone Call	2,846	5,055	4,434	5,149
Control	4,150	6,195	2,817	7,468
Total	19,511	31,691	20,084	35,385

b. Post-Election Survey Sample

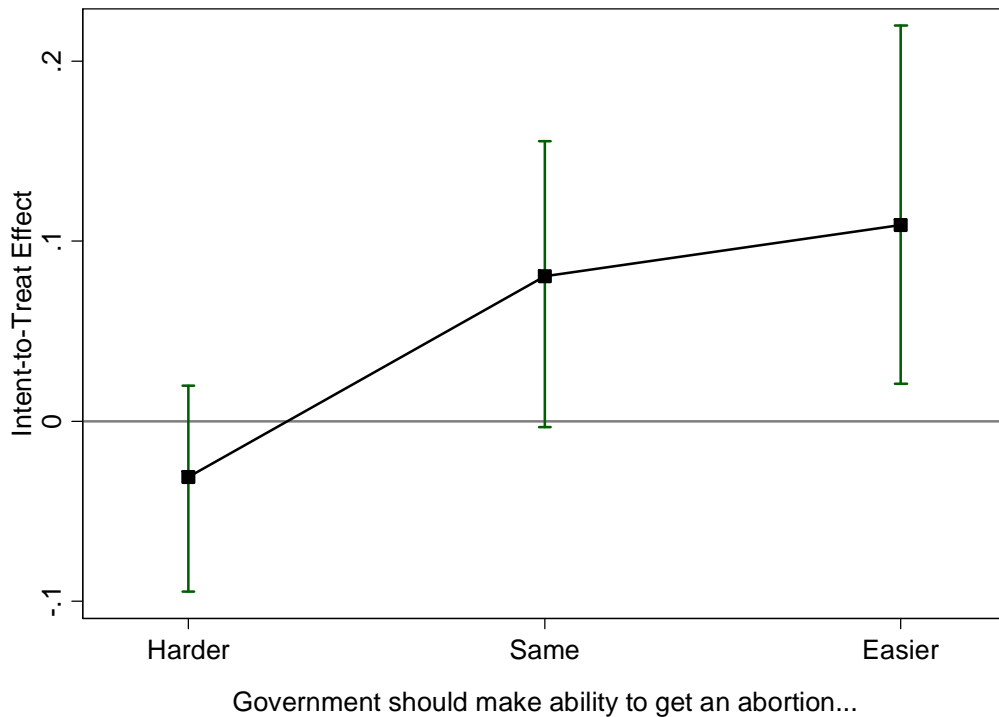
Experimental Condition	District 156	District 161
Door-to-Door Canvass	314	297
Phone Call	572	573
Control	114	130
Total	1,000	1,000

Table 2: The Effects of Personally Delivered Campaign Messages on Issue Attitudes and Priorities

	Abortion Attitude	Birth Control Attitude	Birth Control Importance Ranking
Canvass Treatment	0.059 (0.091)	0.204 (0.109)	0.142 (0.089)
Phone Treatment	0.065 (0.084)	0.028 (0.098)	0.130 (0.082)
Abortion Attitude		1.149 (0.146)	-0.066 (0.114)
Canvass × Abortion		0.395 (0.173)	0.336 (0.133)
Phone × Abortion		-0.120 (0.156)	0.201 (0.124)
Age	0.000 (0.002)	-0.006 (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)
Female	-0.083 (0.063)	0.027 (0.072)	0.060 (0.061)
Gender Not Listed	-0.234 (0.136)	0.074 (0.155)	-0.047 (0.129)
Republican	-0.571 (0.068)	-0.323 (0.078)	-0.178 (0.066)
Democrat	0.306 (0.069)	0.012 (0.081)	0.159 (0.067)
District 156	-0.073 (0.055)	-0.019 (0.063)	-0.043 (0.054)
Cut Points			
τ_1	-0.793 (0.127)	-2.182 (0.157)	-0.735 (0.124)
τ_2	0.791 (0.127)	-0.166 (0.145)	0.058 (0.123)
τ_3			0.596 (0.124)
N	1781	1627	1760
Pseudo-R ²	0.057	0.222	0.014
χ^2	205.496	679.565	68.4

Note: Ordered probit estimates; standard errors in parentheses.

Figure 1: The Effects of Door-to-Door Canvassing on Birth Control Attitudes, as Moderated by Subjects' Predisposition on Abortion

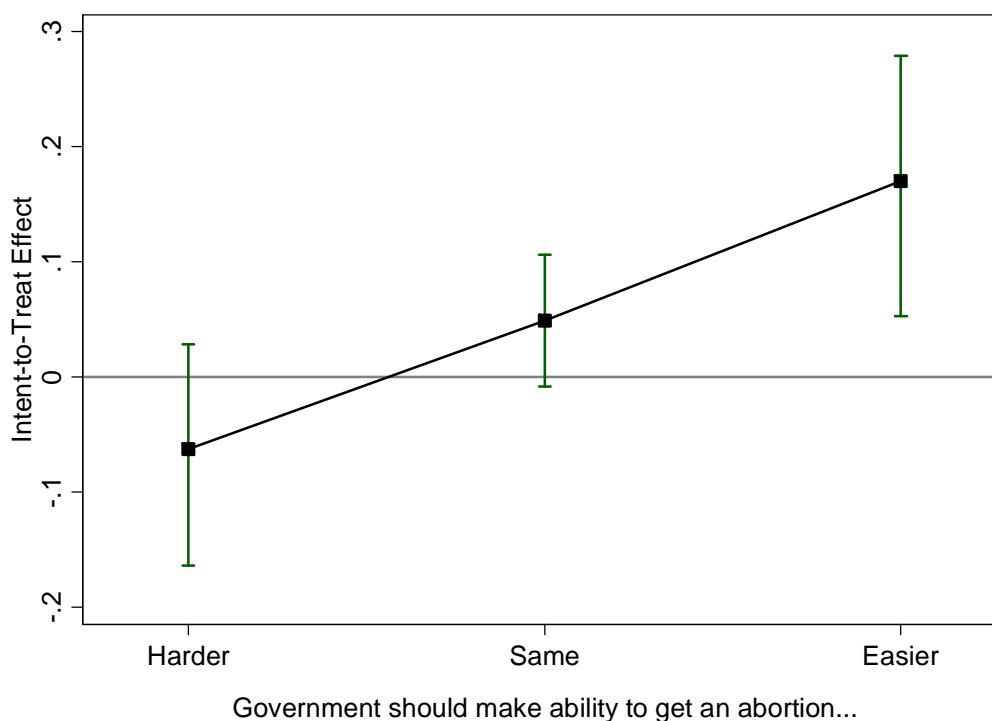


Note: The ITT effects were calculated as follows,

$$ITT = \Pr(BC = 1 | C = 1, A = a) - \Pr(BC = 1 | C = 0, A = a),$$

where BC = birth control attitude (-1 = prefer stricter policies, 0 = prefer status quo, +1 = prefer more permissive policies), C = canvassing assignment indicator (0 = control group, 1 = canvassing group), A = abortion attitude, and a = value of abortion attitude variable (harder, same, easier). The horizontal bars represent the 95% confidence interval, and were estimate with *Clarify* (Tomz, Wittenberg, King 2003).

Figure 2: The Effects of Door-to-Door Canvassing on the Importance Ranking of the Birth Control Issue, as Moderated by Subjects' Predisposition on Abortion



Note: The ITT effects were calculated as follows,

$$ITT = \Pr(BCR = 3 | C = 1, A = a) - \Pr(BCR = 3 | C = 0, A = a),$$

where BCR = birth control importance ranking (0 = not at all important, 1 = somewhat important, 2 = important, 3 = very important), C = canvassing assignment indicator (0 = control group, 1 = canvassing group), A = abortion attitude, and a = value of abortion attitude variable (harder, same, easier). The horizontal bars represent the 95% confidence interval, and were estimate with *Clarify* (Tomz, Wittenberg, King 2003).