

# Issue Ownership and Presidential Primary Elections

## A 2016 Case Study

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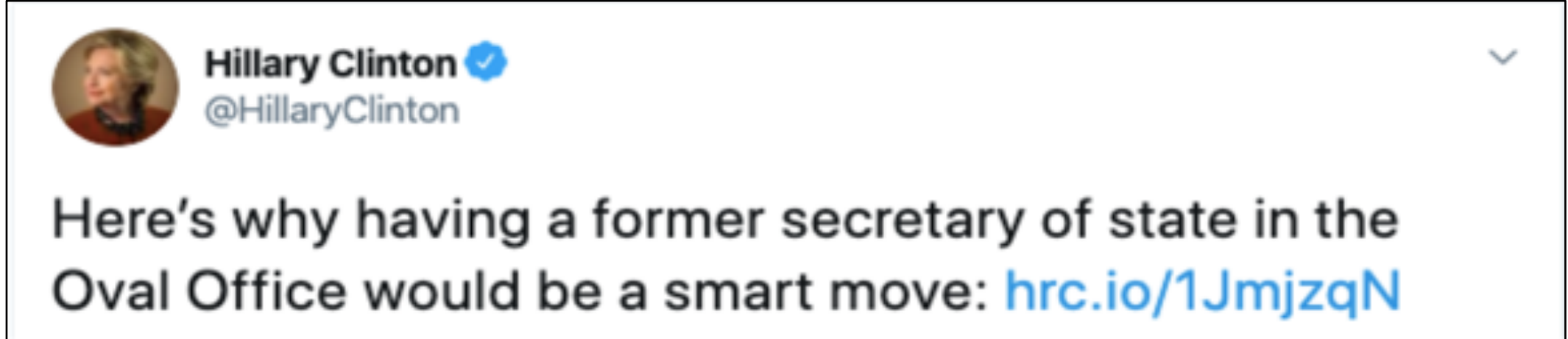
### Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the area of issue-ownership as it applies to the 2016 presidential primaries. The central discussion of the paper features a tradeoff between viability and issues in primary contests. Viability, which is presented through The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform by Marty Cohen et al. as party elites deciding who should be the nominee, and issues that are salient to primary voters, and thus candidates, which I present as the more likely reason for how nominees are selected. Using a combination of national polls and analysis of candidates' Twitter feeds, I hope to compare data on who primary and caucus voters support and which issues are important to them. The hypothesis is simple: if candidates stake claims on issues that voters care about and frequently remind voters of that via Twitter, they will receive a bump in the polls.

Figure 1



Figure 2



### Hypothesis

1. If candidates stake claim on issues that voters care about and frequently remind voters of that via Twitter, they will receive a bump in the polls.
2. Thus, the hypothesis evolves to when candidates own more of the total percentage of tweets, their poll numbers should go up.

#### Democratic Results

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	T Value	P Value	R-Squared	Adjusted R-Squared
Rolling Percentage	-0.253	0.075	-4.724	1.34e-05*** <sup>[1]</sup>	0.9932	0.9927
Clinton	62.387	3.593	17.364	< 2e-16***		
Sanders	51.376	4.215	12.187	< 2e-16***		
Election	-0.282	1.272	-0.221	0.825		
Week	0.276	0.064	4.325	5.54e-05		

<sup>[1]</sup> Significance codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

### Background

- What accounts for the massive and unforeseen ascent of Trump and Sanders in 2016?
  - issue ownership was the culprit for both candidates' success
  - Typically, Republicans own issues like foreign policy and taxes, while Democrats own education and the environment.<sup>[1]</sup>
- Figure 1:<sup>[2]</sup> Candidates try to get voters to trust them to execute policy preferences on issues they care about and speaking from positions of authority
- Issues tracked: terrorism and national security, the economy, employment and jobs, healthcare and the Affordable Care Act, education and distribution of wealth; the budget deficit foreign affairs, size and efficiency of federal government, immigration, and taxes.

#### Republican Results

Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	T Value	P Value	R-Squared	Adjusted R-Squared
Rolling <sup>[1]</sup>	-0.247	0.075	-3.296	0.00123** <sup>[2]</sup>	0.957	0.9549
Carson	7.282	1.031	7.063	5.90e-11***		
Cruz	19.957	3.689	5.410	2.48e-07***		
Rubio	9.074	1.667	5.443	2.12e-07***		
Trump	31.502	2.767	11.384	< 2e-16***		
Election	0.939	1.090	0.861	0.390		
Exit	-21.004	1.448	-14.506	< 2e-16***		
Week	0.405	0.044	9.117	5.12e-16***		

<sup>[1]</sup> Significance codes: 0 '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

### Methods

- Analyzed candidates' twitter feeds for issue related tweets
- Tracked Real Clear Politics' weekly polling numbers.
- I created a rolling percentage variable, which was on ongoing percentage of each candidates' issue-related tweets over the time period that I tracked.
- To decide what issues candidates tried to claim ownership on, I coded the first two debates for each party and marked when candidates referenced their previous experience with one of the salient issues.
- Ultimately employed a candidate fixed effects model to estimate how candidate behavior on twitter one week would impact their polling numbers the next week.

Figure 3

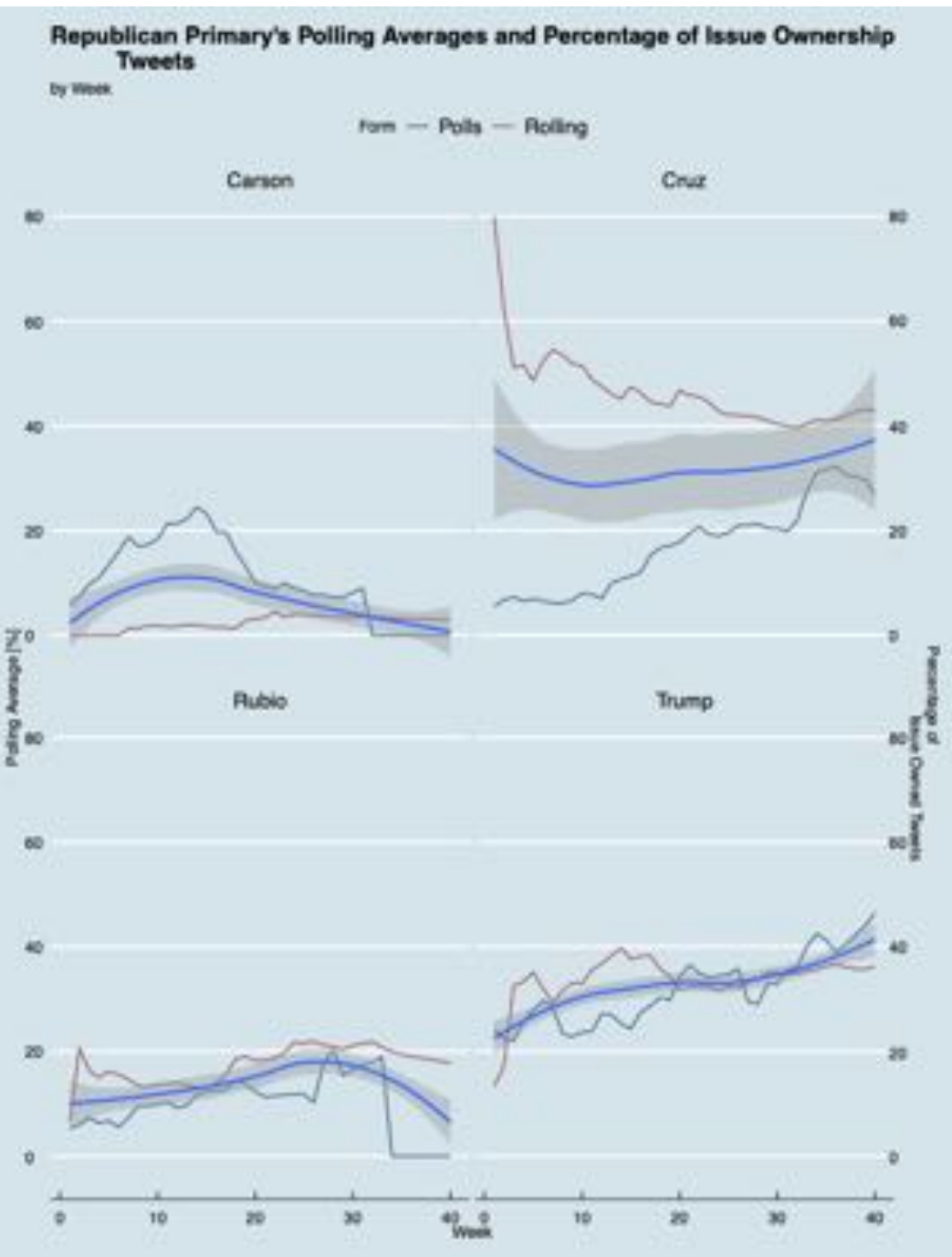
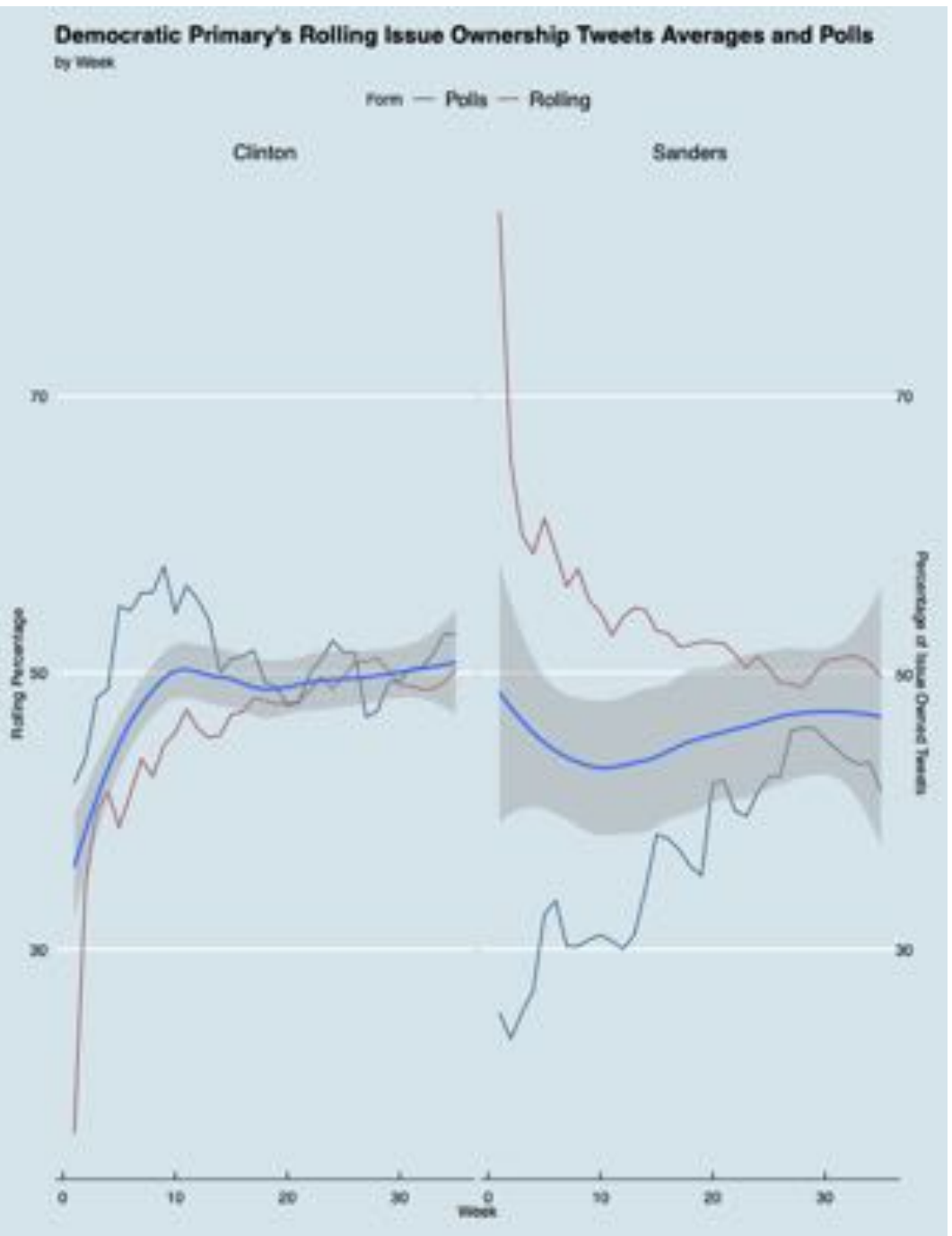


Figure 4



### Results

Using a candidate fixed effects model, that was separated by party, the results for Democrats Tables 1 Figures 2; Republicans in Table 2 and Figure 3.

### Implications

These results call into question the validity of the issue ownership hypothesis and its impact on primary campaigns. The results suggest that as candidates discuss more of the issues that voters care about, their polling numbers drop. This may suggest, as other literature does, that primary campaigns have more to do with the personality of each candidate, rather than the issues they are running on.

### Selected References

Newport, Frank. "Democrats, Republicans Agree on Four Top Issues for Campaign." Gallup.com. Gallup, February, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.  
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Petrocik, John R. "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study." *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3, 1996.