Issue Publics, Campaigns, and Political Knowledge

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Abstract Building on the growing body of research on campaign learning, this paper considers the way that learning about policy issues depends on the nature of the issue and its relevance for the individual citizen. Specifically, the analysis finds that seniors learned much more than non-seniors about candidate positions on an emerging Social Security issue that was heavily emphasized in the 2000 campaign, but not when the same issue was more familiar and largely ignored by the candidates and press in the 2004 campaign. Yet, even without additional learning or campaign emphasis, seniors still knew more than non-seniors in the later contest. These results suggest that once party positions become familiar to them, issue publics will hold their information advantage across future elections without dependence on further campaign emphasis.

Keywords Issue public · Knowledge gap · Campaign learning · Campaign effects

Presidential campaigns are rich in information. News reports, candidate speeches, partisan ads, and even the water cooler conversations that fill the months before an election have the potential to increase voter knowledge about candidates and issues. Because information helps voters link their opinions on policy issues to their decision at the ballot box, campaigns would seemingly provide an essential ingredient for responsive and representative democratic governance. However, the literature on voter knowledge makes clear that everyone does not glean this information equally well. Most scholars contend that campaigns best provide issue- and candidate-specific knowledge to those already generally informed about...
politics, exacerbating the gap between them and the less informed (see, for example, Holbrook 2002; Tichenor et al. 1975; Zaller 1996). The possibility that learning might depend not only on an individual’s store of general political knowledge, but also on the nature of the issue and its relevance to the individual has received less attention. That is, if we take seriously the presence of issue publics—voters with personal commitments to specific policy issues—we come to very different expectations about the dynamics of campaign learning.

A number of researchers have argued that these various subsets of the public who closely follow the particular issues of great interest to them have, as a result, a great deal of issue-specific information even without being generally well-informed about politics (e.g., Converse 1964; Gershkoff 2006; Krosnick 1990; Popkin 1991). More recent work emphasizes the importance of political context in helping these individuals obtain issue-specific information; that is, the combination of personal concern and the availability of information is a key ingredient (Hutchings 2001, 2003). This insight has yet to be extended to the dynamic contexts of presidential campaigns, in which the nature of the issues at play vary across and within election years. To understand how campaigns shape issue-specific knowledge, we must consider not only the current level of campaign emphasis the issue receives, but also how much (or how little) attention the issue has previously received.

In this paper I argue that the joint impact of personal concern for an issue and its salience in the campaign depends on the familiarity voters already have with the issue. Many issues return from one election to the next with candidates following familiar partisan positions. Occasionally, however, new issues emerge for which history provides little guidance even to voters deeply concerned about them. I examine variation in learning across levels of campaign salience and personal engagement for two issues with relatively short histories in presidential electoral politics: allowing private accounts for investing Social Security payroll taxes and amending the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act to allow re-importation of prescription drugs from Canada. The analysis suggests the following patterns of learning: (1) when an issue initially emerges in presidential general election campaigning, its salience plays a critical role in helping those personally concerned with the issue learn the candidates’ positions, and (2) once these individuals have gained their issue-specific knowledge, their advantage tends to persist.

The findings contribute to our understanding of knowledge in the American electorate in at least two respects. First, the persistence of a knowledge advantage for issue publics beyond the moments in which campaigns emphasize their particular issues demonstrates the potential for short term fluctuations in campaign salience to exert long term impacts on political resources. This potential means that examinations of campaign learning effects should account for past as well as current exposure. Second, the results speak to ongoing concerns about the distribution of knowledge. By enlightening the voices of those who pay intermittent attention to politics generally but passionately care about specific issues, campaigns can mitigate the knowledge gap between them and those who follow politics closely. Yet the results also suggest caution. If these issue specialists have different stakes in
the issue than the public at large, then campaigns may simply exchange one pernicious knowledge gap for another.

**Issue-Specific Knowledge, Personal Relevance, and Campaign Salience**

Public opinion researchers have long fretted over the level and distribution of political knowledge in the electorate. Most theories of democratic representation and accountability demand some degree of knowledge from citizens (e.g., Dahl 1989). Voters must have an inkling of where candidates stand on issues if they are to intentionally elect candidates who best represent their own positions on those issues or to punish elected officials who fail to do so.

Yet, polls have repeatedly shown political knowledge to be low and unevenly distributed (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jerit et al. 2006). Because information is a resource that helps individuals engage in politics and make decisions that better reflect their preferences (Althaus 2003; Converse 1990), the uneven distribution of political knowledge poses powerful challenges to democratic ideals (Verba et al. 1995). It is little wonder that democratic theorists and empirical scholars alike have long sought to salvage democracy from the deficiencies and inequities of knowledge among the electorate (Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991).

The *issue public hypothesis* is one attempt to rectify the demands of democratic citizenship with the empirical evidence (Converse 1964; Dalton 2002; Hutchings 2003; Krosnick 1990). It contends that because “different controversies excite different people” individuals are pulled to the specific slices of the political world that most interest them (Converse 1964). Voters may not have a broad base of information about politics, but on the issues important to them they are well-informed. Proponents envision a pluralist division of labor in which issue specialists ensure the protection of the collective interest in their respective policy domains (Dahl 1961; Dalton 2002; Hutchings 2003; Iyengar 1990). These various issue publics have the necessary information to monitor claims and actions of political leaders in their policy domains even though the public at large remains poorly informed about any one policy area.

However, we know little about how these knowledge differences between issue public members and non-members emerge or what role the information environment plays. Most of the work on heterogeneous learning focuses instead on differences between those who are more and less attuned to politics in a general sense. Still, the work on the emergence of those knowledge gaps provides a useful theoretical guide for deriving expectations about when similar gaps between issue public members and non-members emerge. According to the *knowledge gap hypothesis*, those with higher levels of education or who follow the news more closely will tend to pick up new information more readily than the less educated or interested (Genova and Greenberg 1979; Tichenor et al. 1975). These individuals have several advantages when it comes to acquiring information: (1) stronger comprehension skills, (2) larger stores of prior knowledge that help them understand and integrate new information, (3) relevant social contact with others who are likely
to possess and share information, and (4) greater exposure to mass communication. These traits facilitate reception, processing, and retention of information. In the terminology of Luskin’s (1990) framework for political knowledge, these individuals have the ability, the motivation, and the opportunity to acquire more information.

However, two features of the information environment are just as important to this hypothesis about differential learning: (1) the availability of information, and (2) the length of the topic’s publicity in the flow of communication. The first is obvious; the second has received less emphasis. When information on a topic is available, the rate at which the more highly educated and interested learn about it (because of the advantages listed above) will be greater than for others without those advantages—but only so long as this advantaged group does not near knowledge saturation (Genova and Greenberg 1979; Moore 1987). The longer a topic remains highly publicized the more likely these advantaged individuals will encounter information about it, leaving fewer and fewer of them uninformed. Therefore, knowledge follows an S-shaped curve over time: the rate of learning (the slope of the line tangent to this curve at any particular point in time), while initially steep, will level off if information remains available for an extended duration. The same pattern holds for the less advantaged, but the initial climb is delayed. As information accumulates in the environment over time, likelihood of exposure to it increases even for these individuals. Because the process unfolds later it allows for the possibility that the disadvantaged group may exhibit a greater rate of learning at the same time that learning among the advantaged group slows down. In short, the knowledge gap between these groups may cease expanding and begin to shrink if publicity of the topic in the information environment is sustained for sufficient duration.

In this paper I extend this theory to issue publics in order to derive and test theoretical expectations about when members of these groups learn from campaigns at greater rates than non-members. When it comes to acquiring domain-specific knowledge, members of an issue public are different from non-members in much the same way that individuals who are very interested in politics generally differ from the less interested. Returning to Luskin’s framework, issue publics members are more likely to acquire domain-specific information because they are more motivated and have more opportunities to do so. Part of this is political and social; these groups may foster social interaction about shared concerns or campaign micro-targeting by elites. Part of it is psychological. “Self-starting concern” about particular issues motivates these individuals to actively seek out information on these topics (Converse 1964). On the topic of their concern, issue publics exhibit more structured attitudes, larger stores of background knowledge, and a focal point of attention when faced with clusters of information on many topics (Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1990).

Given these advantages, the general theory for heterogeneous learning provides expectations about when issue public members are more likely to learn from campaigns. As noted above, the expectations depend on the availability of information and the length of time the issue has spent on the political agenda. When information is unavailable on a given subject, then we should expect stable
differences (or similarities) in knowledge with neither more nor less learning among
the issue public. When information is available, differences in the rate of learning
between issue publics and the mass public depends on how long the topic has been
in the political discourse. Issue publics are expected to learn more than the mass
public when the topic is relatively new.\footnote{Beyond the two expectations I test here it may be possible to derive additional expectations. One is that
the knowledge gap between issue publics and the mass public will begin to shrink at some point during a
topic’s tenure on the political agenda if information remains available. Unfortunately, beyond the
suggestion that such a result could require sustained information beyond what is typically observed, the
theory offers little guidance about exactly how much information or for how long (Genova and Greenberg
1979).} Whether because psychological attachment (Krosnick 1990) and self-interest (Campbell 2003) motivates a search for
information or because campaigns target appeals to issue publics (Hillygus and
Shields 2008), the combination of motivation and opportunity that helps issue
publics learn today can have lingering effects tomorrow.\footnote{Issue publics may also be more likely to know information at time \( t \) not only because they were more
likely to have acquired it at time \( t - 1 \), but also because they are more likely to recall the information
they learned. Iyengar (1990, p. 162) finds those who are selectively attentive to information about specific
issues are “more able to remember news accounts of these issues about which they are already relatively
well informed”.} As Campbell (2008) put
it, “If voters care enough about the issue for candidates’ positions to matter in
deciding how to vote, they most likely know where the parties’ candidates have
stood and will stand on the issue” (p. 89). Issues that have remained on the political
agenda for some time leave little room for growth in knowledge among issue
publics. For candidate issue positions, the difference between prior knowledge and
current information is unlikely to be large if candidates of the same party take
similar stands across elections (Campbell 2008; Petrocik 1996). The difference will
likely be larger when new issues emerge or when candidates take positions out of
line with their party’s past stance. When this condition holds in conjunction with
availability of information, issue publics are expected to show stronger campaign
learning.

It is also worth considering the mechanisms by which issue public learning
occurs. The classic view of issue publics placed strong emphasis on motivation.
More recently, the conception of issue publics has evolved into a theory of latent
policy interest and emphasizes the importance of opportunity. These individuals are
still motivated to pay attention when they encounter information, but they do not
actively pursue such encounters. This view is much more contextually dependent:
“Attentiveness is contingent on the presence of favorable contextual conditions,
such as the availability of sufficient political information” (Hutchings 2003, p. 4).
For example, Hutchings (2001) shows that African Americans nationally exhibited
no more knowledge than whites about their senators’ votes on the Clarence Thomas
confirmation, but African Americans in states represented by swing Democrats—
where the votes were prominent in local media coverage—were more likely than
whites to correctly identify their senators’ votes. In short, acquisition of issue-
specific information depends on both issue-specific interest and availability of this
information. If issue public learning is predominantly driven by opportunity, then
those individuals situated in contexts with greater information availability (for
example, battleground states and media markets) should exhibit more learning than issue public members in environments where information is scarce. If, on the other hand, learning occurs at comparable rates across campaign contexts—including among those living where information is less readily available—then this would suggest that motivation also plays an important role.

**Emerging Issues for Social Security and Medicare**

I focus on two issues in recent presidential campaigns: (1) a proposal to allow young workers to invest a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes in the stock market, and (2) a proposal to amend the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 to permit re-importation of pharmaceuticals from Canada. These issues are particularly well-suited to this analysis for at least two reasons. First, the evidence for a Social Security and Medicare issue public is well-documented (Campbell 2003). These entitlement programs receive especially high levels of support and interest among a particular voter demographic. Second, testing the expectations laid out in the previous section requires tracking knowledge of candidates’ positions on issues as they emerge. Many issues discussed in a campaign often follow well-worn partisan lines across elections, and new issues emerge less frequently (Campbell 2008; Petrocik 1996).

George W. Bush placed an emerging issue on the 2000 campaign agenda when he proposed allowing private accounts for investing Social Security payroll taxes. To be sure, the notion of investing Social Security contributions in stocks either by individuals or by the Social Security Administration was not completely novel. During the 1990s a handful of policy leaders explored the idea (Arnold et al. 2000; U.S. National Commission on Retirement Policy 1999), but no presidential candidate had ever raised it during a general election campaign. Just as important, it was an emerging issue that received extensive campaign and media attention. Both major party candidates and several interest groups devoted substantial resources to the issue (Johnston et al. 2004). Bush introduced his own position to voters in the summer with early advertising blitzes in mid-June, shortly after the last primary election, and again in late July, immediately preceding the Republican National Convention.

Figure 1 shows the relative share of televised campaign ads mentioning Social Security in 2000 as well as Social Security and Medicare in 2004. During the summer of 2000 Social Security was among the most prominent issues to appear in campaign advertising, mentioned in well over half of ads. The Bush campaign capped off this early emphasis by devoting a substantial portion of the candidate’s acceptance speech to the proposal—about 15% of the entire transcript. Two weeks later Al Gore also spoke about Social Security in his own acceptance speech, dedicating about 6% of it to the program. Gore supported expanding tax deductions for retirement saving but explicitly opposed funding private investment accounts

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3 Television campaign ad data are from Goldstein et al. (2002) and Goldstein and Rivlin (2007).
with Social Security payroll taxes, which he framed as an attempt to privatize the program and as a threat to benefits.

During the following several weeks Social Security faded. As shown in Fig. 1, the campaigns dedicated little of their airtime to the issue. Then it bounced back onto the agenda beginning with the fall debates. The candidates discussed Social Security more than almost any other issue in the initial debate on 3 October (Hershey 2001), including a lengthy back-and-forth over private accounts, and followed with a heated exchange on the issue in the third debate in which Gore again framed the proposal as a threat to current retirees. The final weeks of the campaign was a period of intense focus on private accounts. Network news coverage of Social Security fluctuated between 10 and 18 % of all campaign coverage until the election (Johnston et al. 2004). Not only did the issue reappear in campaign ads by early October, the candidates flooded the airwaves with so many ads mentioning Social Security that the issue appeared in half of all televised campaign ads during the final 2 weeks. Over the entire general election period ads mentioning Social Security made up 26.7 % of total campaign advertising, behind only education at 32.1 % and health care at 32.4 %. However, few ads mentioning education or health care mentioned specific policy proposals such as Bush’s support for school vouchers (just 0.1 % of total ads) or Gore’s support for universal health coverage for children (just 4.1 % of total ads). Among the more than 66,000 ads mentioning Social Security that aired, nearly three-fourths focused on Bush’s proposal for private investment accounts—especially during the summer and late fall. In all, 19.3 % of total general election campaign ads mentioned private accounts.

Four years later the major party candidates once again took opposing stands on the issue, but the issue was never a prominent part of the 2004 campaign. The candidates touched on Social Security only briefly in their acceptance speeches and during the debates. Likewise the campaign saw almost no advertising on the issue. Figure 1 shows that with an exception around the time of the Democratic

Fig. 1 Daily share of presidential candidate advertisements that mention senior issues in the 2000 and 2004 campaigns
Convention, few ads mentioned Social Security until the final weeks of the campaign and even then the level of coverage came nowhere close to 2000 levels. Just 4.9% of total ads mentioned Social Security at all and just 0.7% mentioned private accounts specifically.

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act also received little campaign attention in 2004, but unlike the private accounts issue the new Medicare law had not been salient in the previous election. Less than a year before the 2004 campaign began, congress passed the largest Medicare expansion in the program’s history on a close (and largely partisan) vote with the president’s support. Notable among the changes was inclusion of an entitlement benefit for prescription drugs. During the 2004 contest, Kerry criticized the new law and proposed allowing the re-importation of prescription drugs from Canada where they could be purchased at lower cost. President Bush disagreed, but neither side dedicated much of their acceptance speeches, their time in the debates, or their ads to Medicare. In fact, the specific re-importation topic was not raised in any of the debates. Kerry mentioned it only in passing during his acceptance speech, and Bush not at all. It was an issue for which the public could rely neither on prior knowledge nor on current coverage.

Taken together this combination of issues and elections provides an excellent set of cases for evaluating how voter learning evolves as the tenure and prominence of issues in the information environment changes. Based on the theoretical discussion of the previous section, I expect a knowledge gap to open between the Social Security issue public and the mass public as learning among the former outpaces the latter during the 2000 contest when the private accounts issue first appeared in a general election for president and was heavily emphasized by campaigns and media reports. In 2004 when the issue had an electoral history but few additional messages on the subject were provided to voters, I expect this knowledge gap will remain stable at the levels produced by prior learning from the previous campaign. Furthermore, even though the issue of re-importation was new in 2004, I also expect no differences in learning between the Medicare issue public and the mass public simply because information about it was not readily available in the campaign.

**Data and Measurement**

I evaluate citizen learning about candidate issue positions in the 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys (NAESs). Because learning is a process of change it cannot be captured in a single snapshot. The NAES features a rolling cross section (RCS) design in which members of a large national probability sample are randomly assigned to interview dates. The series of daily surveys spans several months. Although each respondent in the RCS appears only once, the manner in which the data are collected permits comparisons of group trends. Each daily sample (and each aggregated

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4 Both Bush and Gore mentioned prescription drug coverage for seniors repeatedly throughout the 2000 campaign in their speeches and ads. However, neither candidate mentioned the issue of re-importation.

5 For further details about the NAES see Johnston et al. (2004) and Brady and Johnston (2006).
sample across longer time intervals) constitutes a nationally representative and effectively random sample—permitting comparison across time in which the only systematic differences between samples are time induced (Brady and Johnston 2006). I examine learning over the period from 5th July through Election Day. During the 2000 campaign the NAES increased its targeted daily sample size after the July 4th weekend to 300 respondents. Before this date, small sample sizes in combination with the general tendency for early polls about candidates to contain a great deal of noise, might lead to an inability to statistically identify early differences between seniors and non-seniors—thus biasing the results in favor of finding issue public learning if preexisting knowledge gaps become statistically identifiable due only to more estimation precision over time rather than actual change. I also exclude interviews conducted after Election Day. For comparison I use the same timeframe for the 2004 analysis.

Both surveys asked whether each major party candidate supported or opposed “allowing workers to invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market.” Additionally, the 2004 survey also asked respondents whether Bush and Kerry supported or opposed “changing the recently passed Medicare prescription drug law to allow reimporting drugs from Canada.” I measure knowledge with an indicator for correct placement of both major party candidates.

The set of respondents randomly assigned to an interview day and the sample of interviews on that day are not synonymous. The survey design randomly assigns individuals to a ‘replicate’, the day of the first attempted contact, but not all respondents answer the survey on that day. About 60% of respondents assigned to an interview date answer the survey within 2 days of this date; about 90% do so within a week. Because late responders may be systematically different from initial responders, it would be problematic to compare only respondents from the same replicate who answer the survey on different days. However, that is less of an issue here. Because late responders were randomly assigned a date of initial contact, their actual interview dates are effectively randomly distributed throughout the period of analysis (Brady and Johnston 2006).

Results are statistically and substantively similar if all interviews that contain the knowledge questions are included (i.e. 19 May through 27 November 2000, and 19 April through 16 November 2004).

Most of the analyses of learning about Social Security positions in 2000 I present here rely on two separate questions, one asking about Bush’s position and one asking about Gore’s position. This battery was asked over a longer period of time than the alternative item (posed to a separate subset of respondents) asking respondents to simultaneously identify both candidates’ positions within a single question. I also use this approach for analysis of other policy items from the 2000 survey that were asked in this way. The exception is the model combining 2000 and 2004 responses to Social Security questions, which uses the single item from 2000 because it more closely matches the 2004 question.

This question was asked from 19 April to 7 July and again from 11 August through 3 November. Because the first series falls almost entirely outside the timeframe of this analysis, I use only the second series. Results from an analysis of the first series are similar to the results presented below for the second series. The 2004 NAES included two additional questions about candidate positions on the Medicare prescription drug benefit. From 5 October through 16 November, respondents were asked about which candidate “favors allowing the federal government to negotiate with drug companies for lower prescription drug prices for senior citizens.” From 19 April through 9 August, respondents were asked about which candidate “favors the Medicare prescription drug law that was recently enacted.” Because the timing of the interviews, I exclude both. However, neither item revealed greater learning among the issue public.

This is just one among many possible definitions of campaign learning. For example, learning could also describe reduction in the uncertainty surrounding voters’ perceptions even as accuracy remains unchanged (Alvarez 1998; Peterson 2009). Because my substantive concern follows from the literature about whether voters have correct policy knowledge to evaluate candidates and government, I focus on accuracy.
A key challenge for all studies of issue publics is obtaining measures of membership in the group. Ideal measures are rarely available. I use a simple indicator for senior citizens (age 65 years or older) to measure membership in the Social Security and Medicare issue publics. Demographic measures are not perfect—they can include some individuals who care little about the issue and exclude others who care a great deal—but they offer a number of important advantages. First, the most common alternatives are attitudinal measures that suffer their own errors. Typically surveys either use closed-ended items asking respondents how important they think particular issues are or open-ended items asking respondents to name the “most important problem.” Unfortunately, respondents tend to rate almost all issues as highly important on close-ended items and have difficulty interpreting the phrase “most important problem” on open-ended items (Gershkoff 2006). Second, measures of these attitudes may themselves be shaped by changes in the information environment. This is an especially dangerous problem when using a RCS design to study issue public knowledge of an emerging issue. Seniors are mostly a comparable group from July through October; while individuals who say Social Security is important near the end of the campaign may differ systematically from those who say it is important in early July before heavy electioneering begins. To the extent these systematic differences correlate with knowledge, inferences about learning will be muddied. Finally, it is also worth noting that the demographic basis of Social Security and Medicare issue public membership is well established. Seniors, 90% of whom receive these benefits, pay more attention to news reports featuring Social Security and participate more in political activities focused on these programs (Campbell 2003).

Figure 2 presents the raw knowledge data for Social Security investment. Panel 2a displays the daily share of total respondents who correctly identify both candidates’ positions on the issue for 2000 and 2004. Trends are smoothed over 14 day intervals to account for random sampling variation across days. Knowledge of the candidates’ positions increases dramatically in 2000 from an average of 32% over the first week to 56% over the week before Election Day, confirming previous accounts of learning on this issue (Johnston et al. 2004; Lenz 2009). The rise in 2004 is less dramatic,

11 A senior indicator may conflate the effect of age with membership in an issue public. I replicated the statistical models reported below with the addition of age (as a linear term and as a quadratic term) alongside the senior indicator. Age is positively associated with knowledge of candidate positions on these issues, but the relationship between senior status and knowledge persists—indicating the demographic taps something beyond a simple age effect. But even if there is an age based issue public effect on knowledge about Social Security or Medicare over and above the generic impact of age, another complication is identifying the appropriate age cutoff for measuring the issue public. For example, an analysis using a threshold of 50 rather than 65 (the age of eligibility for receiving benefits through these programs) also reveals a positive association between the demographic group and knowledge of Social Security positions—albeit reduced in magnitude by about a third.

12 The responses likely contain measurement error as some respondents randomly guess correctly rather than reporting that they do not know. The fact that some respondents randomly guess does not threaten the conclusions about changes in knowledge if the share of respondents who randomly guess remains constant over time. Furthermore, if the share of respondents who randomly guess declines over time (as the literature on uncertainty suggests) then the test I use here would be biased against finding the patterns of learning I demonstrate. This is because a greater share of responses coded as accurate early in the campaign would be due to random guessing, but no pattern of learning would be detectable for those who moved from accidental accuracy to an informed response later in the campaign. Therefore, even without correcting for random guessing, I provide a conservative test for learning as long as the share of random guessers does not increase over the course of the campaign.
from an average of 48% over the first week to 56% over the final week. Panels 2b and c break responses by senior status. In both years the point estimate for seniors is greater than for non-seniors across nearly all days—but the trends in the gap differ across and within campaigns. In 2000, the distance between the two groups roughly doubles from about seven percentage points in early July to 16 by Election Day. In contrast, the gap is relatively stable over the 2004 campaign, when the issue was older and less salient, as the share of correct responses increases by similar amounts for seniors and non-seniors (6 and 10 percentage points, respectively).

**Senior Learning in 2000 and 2004**

To test the trends from Fig. 2 in a regression model I pool respondents over the period of analysis and model correct placement as a function of senior status and interview date (starting with a value of 1 for 5th July and increasing up to Election Day) while controlling for common predictors of knowledge about candidate issue positions: education (three point scale), income (nine point scale), strength of party identification (four point scale), ideological strength (three point scale), general political knowledge (five point scale, centered on the mean value), and binary indicators for gender and race.13 One concern about this approach is that differences between seniors and non-seniors may have less to do with seniors than with the youngest respondents, who typically pay less attention to politics. Therefore, I divided respondents into three age categories—young (age 18–39), middle (age 40–64), and senior (age 65 or older)—and include an indicator for the youngest group as well as an interaction between this indicator and interview day. I allow the relationship between time and correct placement of candidates to vary across senior status and levels of general political knowledge.14 To account for the uneven geographic distribution of formal campaigning, the model includes media market fixed effects.15 Finally, to account for potential dependence across respondents

13 Political knowledge is measured with a five-point scale indicating the interviewer’s subjective evaluation of the respondent. These subjective measures have been shown to perform as well as scales constructed from direct knowledge tests (Zaller 1992, p. 338). This is the only measure of general political knowledge included in both NAES studies throughout the entire period analyzed here. For short intervals during 2004 the NAES also included a standard five question quiz of facts about government. The subjective and objective measures are relatively well associated with a $\tau - \beta$ coefficient of 0.57.

14 To allow for possible ceiling effects as the share of accurate perceptions approaches the full sample, the models in Table 1 were re-specified using log of interview day. Substantive results are the same. I also estimated separate regression models on weekly samples, thus allowing the relationship between senior status and correct perceptions to vary over time. The overall timing of changes in information shown in the unconditioned differences in Fig. 2 is evident in these models as well. Seniors extend their advantage over the summer months, but differences stabilize over the fall.

15 Fixed effects are included to ensure that the comparison between seniors and non-seniors does not simply proxy for a comparison between battleground and non-battleground residents. If seniors are more likely to live in areas that received substantial campaigning on the Social Security issue, then differences between them and non-seniors would at least partly reflect differences in their information environments. Of course, a geographic-based difference does not necessarily contradict the issue public hypothesis. It could also mean that seniors are targeted with Social Security and Medicare campaigning, supporting the theory of latent issue publics. The NAES data are insufficient for resolving this question of active versus
interviewed on the same day I use estimates for standard errors that are robust to clustering by day.

The estimates from this model appear in the first column of Table 1. Senior status matters for both initial level and trend in knowledge. The coefficient for senior indicates that seniors on average are more likely to correctly identify candidate positions at the start of the period under analysis, and the coefficient on the interaction with day indicates that seniors become even more likely to do so over time. This trend is shown in Fig. 3. The predicted difference between seniors and middle age respondents in probability of correctly identifying both candidates’ positions with all remaining covariates held at mean values is 0.09 (with a 95% confidence interval from 0.05 to 0.12) in early July. The predicted difference for Election Day is roughly 120% larger at 0.19 (with a 95% confidence interval from 0.16 to 0.22). When the issue was in an early stage of emergence the issue public mattered, the campaign mattered, and the two mattered together.  

In 2004 voters could infer current candidate positions from the 2000 contest. The regression results in column two confirm that seniors maintained their knowledge advantage even in an election that featured far less information about candidates’ positions on the issue. The interaction term between seniors and day indicates that the gap remains stable over the campaign. Even without current learning, the knowledge gap between seniors and non-seniors persists. Figure 3 shows a clear difference in the trend of the knowledge gap over the two campaigns.

To more directly test differences in trends across the two campaigns, I estimated a similar logit model that pooled respondents across the two surveys adding an indicator for the 2000 election year; interactions of election year with the senior indicator, the young indicator, the political knowledge scale, and day of interview; three way interactions between election year, day of interview, and each of the age indicators; as well as a three way interaction between election year, day of interview, year, and day of interview.

Footnote 15 continued

latent issue publics, but they do speak to the question about whether the difference between seniors and non-seniors is simply a product of geography. The media market fixed effects essentially compare trends in the difference between seniors and non-seniors within markets. Results are robust to both specifications (as well as to exclusion of any geographic fixed effects).

16 One concern is that members of an issue public may be more likely to perceive differences between candidates on their issue (Krosnick 1990). If this is the case, then the accuracy of seniors’ perceptions could have nothing to do with actual knowledge. To check for this possibility I examine seniors’ propensity to see differences between the candidates on another Social Security issue: Which candidate favors the biggest funding increase? If seniors are more likely to perceive polarization on Social Security issues (regardless of actual candidate positions), then there would be a difference between the two groups on this issue as well. For this test I regress an indicator for perceiving a difference between the candidates on the same set of covariates used in the private accounts models. Seniors are actually less likely to perceive differences between the candidates on funding (and become even less likely to do so by the end of the campaign). This means that the results for private accounts are not simply an artifact of a propensity to see differences between the candidates on issues related to Social Security.

17 As with the 2000 data, I also estimated a separate logit model for each weekly sample from early July through Election Day. The magnitude of the estimated differences between seniors and non-seniors remains stable throughout the period. In most weeks, the probability of accurate perceptions among seniors is about 0.20–0.25 greater than for non-seniors. The only exceptions occur in late August and early September when the weekly differences decline to about 0.15, but even those estimates remain statistically indistinguishable from the estimates from all other weeks.
Fig. 2  a Daily percentage of all respondents correctly placing both candidates’ positions on investing Social Security contributions from 5th July through Election Day in 2000 and 2004. Data are smoothed by 2-week moving average. b Daily percentages of seniors and non-seniors correctly placing both candidates’ positions on investing Social Security contributions from 5th July through Election Day in 2000. Data are smoothed by 2-week moving average. c Daily percentages of seniors and non-seniors correctly placing both candidates’ positions on investing Social Security contributions from 5th July through Election Day in 2004. Data are smoothed by 2-week moving average.
Table 1  Logit results for correctly placing both candidates’ positions in RCS samples

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>0.404** (0.092)</td>
<td>0.787** (0.092)</td>
<td>0.947** (0.116)</td>
<td>-0.445** (0.194)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.157 (0.092)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview day</td>
<td>0.010** (0.001)</td>
<td>0.005** (0.001)</td>
<td>0.009** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.009** (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior × day</td>
<td>0.004** (0.001)</td>
<td>0.000 (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.006 (0.003)</td>
<td>0.010** (0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000 (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>-0.082 (0.079)</td>
<td>-0.301** (0.077)</td>
<td>-0.149 (0.107)</td>
<td>-0.048 (0.168)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>0.164** (0.079)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young × day</td>
<td>-0.002** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.007** (0.003)</td>
<td>0.004 (0.004)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.004 (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>0.289** (0.047)</td>
<td>0.303** (0.027)</td>
<td>0.341** (0.039)</td>
<td>0.102 (0.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.294** (0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge × day</td>
<td>0.002** (0.001)</td>
<td>0.002** (0.000)</td>
<td>0.001 (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.001 (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan strength</td>
<td>0.155** (0.018)</td>
<td>0.154** (0.015)</td>
<td>0.119** (0.017)</td>
<td>0.041** (0.016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological strength</td>
<td>0.088** (0.028)</td>
<td>0.145** (0.020)</td>
<td>0.102** (0.025)</td>
<td>-0.097** (0.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.293** (0.024)</td>
<td>0.339** (0.021)</td>
<td>0.284** (0.022)</td>
<td>0.287** (0.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.080** (0.010)</td>
<td>0.082** (0.008)</td>
<td>0.075** (0.009)</td>
<td>0.032** (0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-0.396** (0.074)</td>
<td>-0.316** (0.055)</td>
<td>-0.220** (0.066)</td>
<td>0.091 (0.065)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.412** (0.042)</td>
<td>-0.486** (0.030)</td>
<td>-0.430** (0.031)</td>
<td>-0.070** (0.034)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.983** (0.323)</td>
<td>-1.234** (0.191)</td>
<td>-1.134** (0.235)</td>
<td>-0.091 (0.111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.396 (0.251)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>15,031</td>
<td>21,212</td>
<td>18,029</td>
<td>15,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCP (%)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All models include media market fixed effects. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by interview day.

PCP percent of observed outcomes correctly predicted by the model (assigning a predicted value of zero to cases with predicted probabilities less than 0.5 and one to cases with predicted probabilities of 0.5 or greater).

** Statistical significance at the 0.05 level
interview, and political knowledge. The results appear in columns three and four of Table 1. The three way senior-by-day-by-year interaction term (0.035 p value for a two-tailed test) is more easily understood through a comparison of probabilities. The interaction is especially useful for comparing the knowledge gains across years for particular age groups. For example, among seniors, knowledge grew by 18 percentage points in 2000 but only four percentage points in 2004—yielding a difference-in-gains of 14 percentage points (statistically significant at the 0.05 level). The difference-in-gains across the campaigns for the young and middle aged are 3 and –2 percentage points, respectively. Neither of the latter two difference-in-gains are significant at customary thresholds, indicating no difference in learning between campaigns for either non-senior age group. Further, the model permits estimation of the difference in the difference-in-gains across age groups. The difference-in-gains across campaigns is 16 percentage points larger for seniors than for the middle aged (statistically significant at the 0.05 level). Clearly, growth in the knowledge among seniors relative to younger respondents during the 2000 campaign outpaced any change during the 2004 campaign.

The difference in learning between 2000 and 2004 shown in Fig. 3 cannot be entirely attributed to differences in the salience of the issue in campaign rhetoric. One reason is that discussion of Social Security was not uniformly low throughout 2004. Recall that the advertising data in Fig. 1 shows distinct spikes in August and late October. On neither occasion do these spikes in candidate attention to the issue change the knowledge gap between seniors and non-seniors either in the raw proportions shown in Fig. 2 or across separate regressions for weekly samples. When the issue was older in 2004, the issue public knowledge gap did not require help from the current campaign.

Finally, it is worth considering an emerging issue that was not prominently featured in the 2004 campaign—changing the Medicare prescription drug benefit to allow re-importation from Canada. Like Social Security in 2000, seniors and non-seniors alike could not turn to past elections to form their perceptions of the
candidates’ positions. Unlike the case of Social Security in 2000, the 2004 campaign provided few messages about Medicare. Results for this issue appear in the final column of Table 1. Figure 3 shows that in the absence of both a historical legacy and current salience there is no information advantage for the issue public. This survey item cannot be tested against an identical item from another election because no such data are available, but the difference between re-importation in 2004 and private accounts in 2000 is suggestive. A knowledge gap between the issue public and the mass public opened for the emerging issue that received substantial campaign attention but not for the emerging issue that received little.

**Panel Analysis: Persistent Knowledge**

The analysis so far, based on repeated cross sections, hints at the idea that prior learning persists as current knowledge. For instance, the knowledge gap in 2004 looks very much like the knowledge gap from the end of the 2000 campaign. But this cannot establish that seniors are more likely to know candidate positions on Social Security at a later point in time because they were more likely to have learned at some earlier point. A panel survey asking these information questions to the same respondents in both elections would provide the best test for this claim. Unfortunately, no such data are available. As a substitute I turn to the pre-/post-election NAES panel survey conducted during the 2000 campaign. The panel includes only two waves of interviews spaced in such a way as to miss most of the learning among seniors. The pre-election wave was fielded continuously from the spring through early November. The post-election wave was fielded in the weeks following Election Day. The evidence from the RCS survey indicates most senior learning occurs during the initial wave of the panel rather than between the two waves; therefore, many seniors are interviewed for the pre-election wave after learning the candidate positions.  

Just under half of panel respondents could correctly identify both candidates’ positions in the initial interview and nearly two-thirds could in the post-election interview. Among those who are correct at the initial interview, 89% again correctly placed the candidates in the post-election interview. Among those who could not correctly place both candidates in the first interview, 50% did so after the election. Regression results for the panel data appear in Table 2. The first column presents a model of pre-election knowledge. Seniors were more likely to correctly place both candidates in the first interview. In fact, seniors are predicted to have a higher probability of accurate placement by 0.11 (with a standard error of 0.03) than middle age respondents with all other covariates held at mean values.

The second column of Table 2 shows the results for a similar model for post-election knowledge. Seniors are again more likely to correctly place both candidates by a probability 0.08 higher than that of middle age respondents (with a standard error of 0.02). To test persistence of knowledge I also include a lagged indicator for

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18 The 2000 NAES includes a four wave panel as well, but those data include even fewer cases and no waves were administered prior to the convention period.
accuracy in a model of post-election knowledge (column 3). A key result stands out: the senior indicator no longer predicts accuracy but the lagged measure does. Past knowledge is highly predictive of current knowledge even when controlling for the length of time between interviews. Knowledge persists. Of course, on its own this does not prove that knowledge will persist across the intervals between elections, and it may be the case that the salience of Social Security in the 2000 campaign facilitated consistent responses across interviews. Even so, the result suggests a plausible explanation for why the knowledge gap in 2004 resembles the one at the end of the 2000 campaign—suggesting that the impacts of campaigns may be more long-lasting than commonly viewed (Gerber et al. 2011; Mitchell 2012). Seniors were more knowledgeable later simply because they had been more likely to learn earlier.

**Robustness Checks**

One concern about the results of the previous sections is that seniors simply may be more likely to follow politics and learn from campaigns generally. In that case, the
Social Security learning in 2000 would have nothing to do with issue publics. To investigate this possibility I conduct a series of placebo tests examining senior learning on a variety of other issues in the 2000 and 2004 NAES. I use all questions about candidate issue positions that are worded in a consistent way throughout the late summer and the fall (the period of investigation comparable to the Social Security analysis). In the 2000 NAES these questions include which candidate favors a larger tax cut, government health coverage for children, restricting abortion, licensing all handguns, school vouchers, banning soft money campaign contributions, the death penalty, allowing homosexuals to serve openly in the military, and giving patients the right to sue their health maintenance organization. In the 2004 NAES these include questions about whether candidates favor making the Bush tax cuts permanent, the amount at which Kerry would repeal the Bush tax cuts, government health insurance for children and workers, and the federal assault weapons ban, and eliminating overseas tax breaks to cut taxes for companies that create jobs in the US. I use the same regression models as for the tests of Social Security and prescription drug learning but simply replace those outcome variables with these other knowledge items. The results of these tests are presented in Fig. 4 as the change over the campaign in the difference between senior and middle age probabilities of correct placement. Positive values of change indicate more learning among seniors than among middle age respondents. In only one of these 14 tests is the null hypothesis of no change rejected: universal health coverage for children during the 2000 campaign. This exception presents a puzzle, particularly because on its face the issue would seem to have little to do with seniors and because the campaigns did not emphasize the particular subject of universal coverage for children (which appeared in only 4 % of ads). Even so, this sole exception is not indicative of a more general difference in senior learning.

As a second robustness check, I explore campaign learning among other issue publics. I use four questions that are (a) asked with consistent wording over a significant portion of the late summer and fall, and (b) readily linked to a measure of issue public membership. The issue publics and issues are: parents and school vouchers (2000 NAES); evangelicals and restricting abortion (2000 NAES); National Rifle Association members and the assault weapons ban (2004 NAES); and union members and easing the rules for union organizing (2004 NAES). These issues vary in their tenure on the political agenda and the availability of information about them during the campaign. First, abortion is the classic “old” issue—each party’s presidential candidates have taken consistent position on it for at least the previous two decades and it has received substantial media attention at various times before the 2000 campaign. During the 2000 campaign, the candidates once again took positions in line with their parties. The theory presented here suggests that there will be little change in the knowledge gap between the issue public and the general public given the issue’s history. Second, the issue of school vouchers is less clear. The idea has circulated among elites at least since the 1950s, but except for a brief period during school desegregation of the 1960s, the proposal only appeared in legislative debates and a few localities in the 1990s (Moe 2001). During that decade the presidential candidates had taken opposing positions, but they dedicated few resources to campaigning on the issues. Indeed, by 2000, few
Americans had any familiarity with the issue (Moe 2001). Therefore, school vouchers may be considered an emerging issue even in 2000. But because the campaign paid hardly any attention to this issue, we should not see a knowledge gap emerge between parents and non-parents.

Classification of the third issue is also challenging. The federal assault weapons ban had been in place for 10 years after being hotly debated during its passage under President Clinton. The issue is also easily linked to gun control policy more broadly, from which voters may infer candidate positions on the basis of the consistent stands the parties’ nominees have taken in the past. In 2004 Kerry supported the ban. The complication lies in President Bush’s position. He verbalized his support for the ban but took no steps to secure its renewal, prompting Kerry to characterize the president as an opponent of gun control. Despite the Republican president’s verbal support of the ban, few Republicans in congress supported it and the law was allowed to expire in 2004. The campaign as a whole provided very little attention to the issue of gun control—only one-tenth of one percent of televised advertising mentioned guns. However, the NRA targeted gun enthusiasts with an intense direct mail campaign that criticized Kerry as a threat to gun rights (Dao 2004). The campaign did not feature Bush’s position on the assault weapons ban. In other words, information was readily available to NRA members about the older dimensions of the issue (gun control as a general topic) but not the relatively new dimension (Bush’s verbal support for the assault weapons ban, a position out of sync with most of his fellow Republicans in congress). Therefore, we should not expect a

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**Fig. 4** Change over the campaign in the difference between seniors and middle age respondents in probability of correctly identifying both candidates’ positions on issues. Positive values indicate seniors learn more than middle age respondents over time. *Bars* represent 95 % confidence intervals.
learning difference between NRA members and the rest of the public about the candidates’ positions on the federal assault weapons ban.

Unlike the first three, the final test presents an opportunity to examine learning about an emerging issue when information is readily available to members of an issue public. The issue concerns “card checks”, a relatively new strategy for union organizing (McCracken and Butters 2004). In November 2003 Democratic members of congress filed the Employee Free Choice Act, which would have allowed unions to bypass a secret ballot election among workers to secure bargaining rights with management if 50 % of employees signed cards declaring support for the union. At the time, unions could use “card check” only if management was willing to forego the secret ballot, but in June 2004 the Republican dominated National Labor Relations Board put the future of “card check” in doubt when it announced its intention to review the method. The Employee Free Choice Act would have preserved “card check” and required management to abide by it. Republican officials, including President Bush, generally opposed “card check” and introduced their own legislation in August 2004 to require secret ballot elections. Unions, which strongly support “card check”, pledged to use the issue to galvanize their members’ votes for the presidential election (Gallagher 2004). While the candidates and media paid little attention to this issue during the campaign, the unions emphasized it in their appeals to members. Data on the content of direct mail from the 2004 campaign reveals that only about 1 % of mailings mentioned union issues, but among mailings sent by private sector unions 39 % mentioned union issues—a higher percentage than for any other single issue in union mailings except health care.19 Thus, union members had access to available information about an emerging issue during the 2004 contest—conditions which predict greater learning among the issue public.

Tests of each of these four expectations appear in Fig. 5. In each case, the theoretical expectations are verified. On older topics or topics with limited information availability (school vouchers, abortion, and the assault weapons ban), the issue public shows no more learning than the general public. Only in the case of union organizing, which was new and highly publicized to union members, does a knowledge gap between the issue public and the general public emerge.20

Motivation or Opportunity

The evidence presented thus far does not speak to the mechanisms for issue public learning. Do issue publics learn because they are more motivated to acquire

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19 These figures are based on analysis of the 2004 Campaign Communications Study data on direct mail conducted by the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University. See Hillygus and Shields (2008) for further details.

20 This result is not a function of union members paying greater attention to politics and therefore learning more about all issues. Union members did not outlearn others on prescription drug re-importation, private accounts for Social Security, tax cuts, the assault weapons ban, or eliminating overseas tax breaks in order to cut taxes for companies that create jobs in the US. Other than union organizing, the only issue on which union members learned more than the rest of the public was providing government health insurance for all children and workers.
information about their issue? Or, are issue publics simply “sleeping giants” that must be activated? Establishing the mechanism is a tricky task, but one suggestive approach is to compare senior learning about Social Security in different contexts of campaign intensity. Some states and media markets received a great deal of campaign attention while others received almost none. Interestingly, in 2000 seniors were more likely than non-seniors to live in battleground states and in media markets where campaign television ads had higher average gross ratings points (GRPs). If the senior advantage is confined only to battleground contexts that received a great deal of campaigning, then this would suggest issue publics learning stems from greater opportunity to acquire information. Yet even seniors in safe states had some information available to them—they could still watch the conventions or debates, follow the national news coverage of the issue, or ask friends and family about the issue—the information was just less readily available than in the battleground. If seniors outside the contested states show a similar rate of

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Fig. 5 Change over the campaign in the difference in the probability of correctly identifying both candidates’ positions on an issue when comparing members of an issue public to all other respondents. The issues and issue publics are: school vouchers and parents, abortion and evangelicals, the federal ban on assault weapons and NRA members, and easing restrictions on union organizing and union members. Positive values indicate more learning among the issue public than among other respondents. Bars represent 95 % confidence intervals

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21 GRPs provide a measure of audience reach. A value of 100 represents a television ad buy that would be seen once, on average, by everyone in the media market. In 2000, values of total GRPs for presidential advertising range from 0 to 76,692 (in Madison, WI). A value of zero indicates that no purchases were made in that market, and, therefore, that no one there saw any television campaign ads. The highest value means that, on average, residents in the Madison media market saw over 760 ads over the course of the campaign. These GRP data are from Shaw (2006).
learning, then that would suggest seniors are motivated to find out about the issue even when information is relatively scarce.

Tests of these expectations appear in Table 3. The first column shows results for respondents living in the battleground states where television campaign advertising was very high (average GRP of 34,610 across all media markets within these states). The second column combines respondents living in the battleground and leaning states, which together have an average GRP of 25,163. For comparison, the third column presents estimates based on respondents who not only live in safe states but also live in media markets that received no presidential campaign advertising. Safe states media markets that nevertheless received campaign ads because they overlap with contested states are excluded. In all three samples, the null hypothesis of equivalent learning between seniors and middle age respondents can be rejected at least at the $\alpha = 0.10$ level. In substantive terms, the difference between seniors and middle age respondents in their probabilities of correctly identifying both candidates rises from 0.08 (with a 95% confidence interval of 0.03–0.13) to 0.18 (with a confidence interval from 0.13 to 0.22) over the course of the campaign in battleground and leaning states. Meanwhile in media markets with no campaign advertising, the difference rises from 0.10 (with a 95% confidence interval of 0.04–0.15) to 0.22 (with a 95% confidence interval of 0.17–0.23). These results have three implications. First, the fact that seniors have a learning advantage in markets where information was relatively scarce suggests that seniors are seeking out information; that is, they are motivated to acquire knowledge about their issue. Second, this pattern is roughly similar across the different levels of intensity—again suggesting that senior learning is not driven simply by exposure to more campaigning. Finally, the fact that seniors continue to diverge from middle age respondents in the most intense campaign environments is also suggestive. If senior learning really just masked an underlying process of battleground learning in which those who are more exposed to the campaign gather more information from it (which would appear as senior learning because seniors happen to be more likely to live in the high exposure battleground), then we should not see an age difference in the battleground. Yet, even in these intense environments, seniors were especially likely to learn compared to other age groups who were equally exposed, suggesting they are more active in the pursuit of information about Social Security.

Why Issue Public Learning Matters

The analysis so far shows that those with a special connection to Social Security were more likely than others to know the candidates’ positions on private accounts by the end of the 2000 campaign and throughout the 2004 campaign. Does this learning substitute for deficiencies in general political knowledge? Of central concern is whether seniors with lower levels of general political knowledge were

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especially likely to learn in 2000. Table 4 compares seniors to middle age respondents in the same classification of general political knowledge. The first column shows the estimated difference in the probability of a correct placement in an early July comparison, while the second column shows the difference on Election Day. The final column shows the change over the campaign in the magnitude of the gap between seniors and non-seniors within the same level of general political knowledge. The strongest evidence for issue public learning appears in the middle of the knowledge distribution where the gap between seniors and non-senior grows over time.

These results raise a second concern: Does issue public learning replace the general knowledge gap, in which voters’ positions are strongly related to politically

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Table 3 Logit results for correctly placing both candidates’ positions in RCS samples by battleground status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private accounts for Social Security</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000 Battleground states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>0.247 (0.207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview day</td>
<td>0.009** (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior × day</td>
<td>0.005* (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>−0.289* (0.149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young × day</td>
<td>0.001 (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>0.242** (0.090)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge × day</td>
<td>0.002* (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan strength</td>
<td>0.188** (0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological strength</td>
<td>0.047 (0.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.279** (0.042)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.084** (0.018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>−0.447** (0.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.412** (0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.897** (0.163)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average GRP</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCP (%)</td>
<td>66</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by interview day

*PCP* percent of observed outcomes correctly predicted by the model (assigning a predicted value of zero to cases with predicted probabilities less than 0.5 and one to cases with predicted probabilities of 0.5 or greater)

***, * Statistical significance at the 0.05 and 0.10 levels, respectively

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23 These estimated probabilities are based upon regression analyses structurally similar to the one presented in the first column of Table 1 but conducted separately within levels of general political knowledge. Because only 4% of the sample was graded in the lowest category of general political knowledge the bottom two categories (D and F) are combined.
relevant socio-economic differences, with a more equitable distribution? To the extent that campaign learning advantages particular groups with distinct interests and preferences, the issue public hypothesis loses its normative appeal. The evidence on this point is only suggestive, but it appears that issue publics may pose problems for representative democracy. Although seniors and non-seniors largely agree on preserving the benefits of entitlement programs for the elderly, they hold markedly different views on other critical aspects of Social Security and Medicare. In the 2000 NAES data, seniors are 13 percentage points more likely than young respondents to favor strengthening the Social Security system over cutting taxes and 26 percentage points more likely to oppose the Bush plan for private accounts even after controlling for partisanship, ideology, and socio-economic traits. Because seniors are more likely to vote and donate to campaigns generally (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003) and especially more likely to do so on behalf of these entitlement programs (Campbell 2003), their information advantage extends the threat of disproportionate policy influence.

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that issue publics learn from campaigns when (a) they have something to learn, and (b) the campaign provides the missing information. This has important implications for assessing the capacity of campaigns to inform voters and for understanding the distribution of issue-specific knowledge across the electorate. First, although issue publics are more likely to encounter campaign information on their favored topic, prior exposure to the topic can leave them with fewer knowledge deficiencies by the time the current campaign reaches them. It would be a mistake however, to conclude that campaigns have minimal learning effects. In fact, just the opposite appears to be true: campaigns have sizable long-term effects on knowledge. Voters may have little need to learn more today precisely because they already learned from the campaign, even from the last campaign. When new issues emerge and are highly salient in the campaign, however, issue publics are especially responsive to this information and knowledge gaps between them and the mass public quickly expand. Later, without continued campaign emphasis, issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General political knowledge</th>
<th>Early July</th>
<th>Election Day</th>
<th>Change in difference (Election Day – July)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0.06 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.11** (0.05)</td>
<td>+0.06 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>0.09** (0.04)</td>
<td>0.22** (0.03)</td>
<td>+0.13** (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>0.07** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.19** (0.04)</td>
<td>+0.12** (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D/F</td>
<td>0.14** (0.06)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Probability results are simulated from logit models paralleling the model presented in the first column of Table 1 but treating general political knowledge as ordered categories rather than a single scale. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by day of interview.
publics maintain a distinct knowledge advantage. The learning gap may require current campaign information, but the knowledge gap does not.

The second implication follows directly from the first: the persistence of knowledge gaps between issue publics and the mass public in the absence of campaign emphasis invites discussion about the normative implications of issue publics for democracy. On one hand, as proponents of the issue public hypothesis contend, the process of issue public learning mitigates the traditional deficiencies of political knowledge among those less generally attentive to politics but who care about particular issues. Issue public learning brings these individuals in line with more generally informed members of the mass public, at least when it comes to their specific issue. Under the right conditions, then, the intersection of individuals’ issue concerns and the salience of those issues in the campaign can provide an important political resource to voters who are otherwise weakly engaged with politics in a general sense. On the other hand, these campaign learners do not necessarily hold the same preference on their issue as the mass public. As a result, issue public learning may simply shift the electorate from one unrepresentative knowledge distribution to another.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank D. Sunshine Hillygus for many helpful comments and for access to direct mail data for the 2004 campaign, Daron Shaw for providing access to media market data and for comments offered at a presentation of an earlier draft of this paper at the 2009 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, as well as Claudine Gay, Paul Peterson, and Stephen Ansolabehere for helpful comments. This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation’s IGERT program, Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy at Harvard University (Grant No. 0333403).

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