



My Body, My Vote, My Choice: Abortion Messaging & the 2022 Midterm Election

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Abstract

This paper seeks to test the folk wisdom of abortion as a salient electoral issue for increasing Democratic vote share in the 2022 midterm elections following the overturning of the Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey precedents in the Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Supreme Court decision (Freeland, 2022; Thomson-DeVaux, 2022; Ollstein & Messerly, 2022). Democratic House candidates explicitly mention abortion issues more in comparison to their Republican counterparts on their campaign websites. Our study found support for the hypothesis that Republican mentions of abortions on their campaign websites robustly relate to increased Democratic vote share. This paper's model finds that environmental factors, like female candidates and the presence of abortion ballot measures, may increase the effect size of Republican abortion platforms in expanding Democratic vote share. The legal status of abortion or the presence of an abortion referendum alone is not a significant predictor of election results for the 2022 midterms. These findings suggest that the Dobbs decision may mobilize pro-choice voters through negative partisanship to vote for Democratic candidates because Republican rhetoric now advocates for maintaining or furthering the status quo.

Keywords: abortion, midterms, Republicans, Democrats, campaign, election

Introduction

Scholars largely agree that the major American political parties hold polarized positions on abortion (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024; Pew Research, 2022; Daynes & Tatalovich, 1992). Yet, political scholarship is inconclusive about abortion's electoral impact. Abortion issues span decades of political relevance for Republicans and Democrats. However, the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision departs significantly from the landmark *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* precedents. The *Dobbs* decision's immediate impacts include the initiation of ballot measures and a change in predictions regarding abortion's electoral impact in the 2022 campaign.¹ Conventional folk wisdom by political pundits and the media present *Dobbs* as redirecting the midterm narrative from the economy to a rebuke of the Supreme Court's decision (Freeland, 2022).²

This paper intends to understand the interaction between vote choice and the contextual political climate.³ Many pundits point to the success of Democratic candidates in states like Michigan, with no abortion codification and a 2022 ballot initiative, to indicate the importance of state context during the campaign (Thomson-DeVaux, 2022). The theory extends to the success of Republican House candidates in states with enshrined abortion protections, like New York.

Incremental political framing of the issue by Democrats and Republicans over decades culminates in a radically novel electoral environment for abortion issues because of *Dobbs*.⁴ The prominence of issue voting is questionable, but this election could demonstrate the powerful electoral effect that abortion issues have in energizing pro-choice voters. *Dobbs* sends abortion law back to the voters in the states, potentially altering the state of the midterm campaign. Putting abortion rights into the hands of local legislators and potentially voters might shift campaign narratives and motivations of voters. Democrats can leverage the so-called extremity of the contemporary Republican abortion stance for electoral advantage. The Republican position opposes *Roe*, and the Democratic position supports reinforcing *Roe*. Positioning by the parties established Democrats as advocating for a popular alternative to the new status quo (Pew Research, 2022). These factors lead to the hypothesis that Democrats will engage with the issue more frequently than Republicans.

Dobbs leaves abortion laws to state discretion. The research question of our study investigates whether voters weigh their immediate environmental and state-level risks to abortion access in their state, including legal protections,

1 *Dobbs*, *Roe*, and *Casey* serve as shorthand for each respective Supreme Court cases of the same names.

2 Conventional folk wisdom in this paper refers to the electoral narrative generally accepted by laypeople, specifically regarding abortion's importance in the 2022 midterm campaign.

3 The political climate in our study is defined as the political climate surrounding a state's abortion legality, abortion ballot initiatives, and the presence of female candidates.

4 This claim refers to the political framing that the political parties created over the decades since *Roe*.

ballot referendums, and candidate gender, in their vote choice. Our study broadly predicts that voters will engage in *negative partisanship* voting behavior, especially pro-choice voters reacting to the opinions of political opposition or cross-pressures due to the state environment. Contextual factors could have individual effects, but more likely compound with *negative partisanship*.

Our study revolves around the campaign rhetoric on candidate websites. Albeit a novel method, this paper uses candidate websites to analyze a campaign's broadest rhetorical appeal (Druckman, 2009, pp. 357–358). Compiling text data from every existing Democratic and Republican federal House 2022 campaign website and searching for the presence of abortion-related terminology will indicate the presence of abortion rhetoric for each candidate.

Literature Review

Party Stances

Abortion became a central issue in the 2022 midterm elections because the political parties decisively positioned themselves on the issue over decades of political posturing (Adams 1997; Traugott and Vinovskis, 1980; Daynes and Tatalovich, 1992; Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024). When the United States Supreme Court reversed the *Roe* and *Casey* precedents in 2022, the status quo of the abortion issue switched from a nationwide guarantee of abortion rights to an issue of debate for the states. The Democratic Party advocated for reinforcing *Roe* before *Dobbs*. Following *Dobbs*, the novel political environment resulted in Democrats advocating for a change in the status quo. The change might have resulted in Democrats making abortion a large part of their midterm campaigns. Conversely, Republicans might not have talked about abortion unless it became a campaign issue. Voters, particularly pro-choice voters, would turn out highly due to the perceived extremity of the Republican position.

Historically, abortion was not a compelling electoral issue. Before *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, abortion was a moral issue instead of a political one (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024). Following *Roe*, with no immediate electoral backlash, the media focused on abortion's effect in the 1978 Congressional elections, like the election of President Nixon, where voters' views on abortion did not affect their vote choice (Adams, 1997, pp. 553–557). While the media was effective at framing the election about abortion, there was little evidence that voters cast their ballots because of their stances on it during this election cycle (Traugott and Vinovskis, 1980, p. 245). In the election cycles following *Roe*, the major parties began to evolve on the issue and transformed their stances.

While pro-life Democrats continued to run in the presidential primaries, activist pressure solidified the Democratic stance in the following decades by conforming to the wishes of pro-choice groups (Daynes and Tatalovich, 1992, p. 546). On the other hand, Republicans did not wholly focus on the issue for over a decade. George Bush differentiated himself from Reagan in his vice-presidential role on the issue of abortion, and during his presidential run, included

the exceptions for incest, rape, and the mother's life (Daynes and Tatalovich, 1992, p. 553). Eventually, conservative activist groups moved the party elites to a decisively pro-life stance (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024; Daynes & Tatalovich, 1992, pp. 550–559).⁵

Although interest groups for Democrats and Republicans had advocated staunch positions on abortion since *Roe*, the political parties modified their platforms incrementally to satisfy activist coalitions without angering moderate voters or causing notable electoral backlashes (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024). However, overturning *Roe* and *Casey* was a significant change in national abortion policy and caught the attention of people who casually engage in politics. For example, the campaign narratives moved away from a rebuke of the current President or their economic performance. This shift undoubtedly altered the dynamic of the midterm elections and abortion politics nationwide (Ollstein & Messerly, 2022).

Despite conventional folk wisdom and polling that indicated a change to horse-race polling following *Dobbs*, it might have reflected an enthusiasm boost rather than a change in vote preference (Freeland, 2022).⁶ Supreme Court decisions and nominations are important events in American politics. While Supreme Court nominations receive recognition for influencing elections, changes to legal standards might also motivate voters (Badas & Simas, 2022, pp. 16–17). When *Roe* stood as the national legal standard, Democrats advocated strengthening and reinforcing the status quo. Republicans conversely advocated for a significant change to the status quo to satisfy pro-life activists. Therefore, *Dobbs*'s seismic movement in abortion's legal status might have driven high engagement and inflicted *negative partisanship* attitudes against anti-abortion policies.

The overturning of *Roe* fueled a surge in information in the form of media coverage. Campaigns with large amounts of coverage and accompanying information leads voters to make more informed decisions (Bartels 1996, pp. 220–221). However, more information did not overcome partisanship; pre-existing attitudes affected decision-making for voters (Guntermann & Lenz, 2021, p. 3). Voters more accurately identified party positions, but this knowledge ultimately did not sway most voters (Guntermann & Lenz, 2021, p. 28).⁷ Therefore, the abortion information environment may heighten voter awareness of candidates' abortion stances, but likely will not cause them to deviate from their vote preferences. Instead, the heightened information environment motivated voters who previously held these positions.

Heightened information generated greater engagement. Heightened engagement possibly increased voter engagement with party platforms. In an

5 Advocating for strict restrictions or complete bans.

6 Horse-race polling refers to the competitive and uncertain nature of pre-election polling, akin to that of a head-to-head horse race.

7 Broockman & Kalla introduce the term *partisan intoxication* to describe this phenomenon described by Guntermann & Lenz: voters do not consider information that is contrary to their partisanship and resist accurate representations about candidates (Broockman & Kalla, 2010, p. 1).

electorate increasingly driven by *negative partisanship*, voters reacted to the platforms of the political opposition rather than the platform of their political preference (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, p. 21).⁸ Deviance from political extremity could further explain voter behavior in pro-choice results of abortion referendums nationwide, especially in Republican states, as another example of *negative partisanship* for independents. The conservative activist groups that pushed the courts and the Republican party on this issue might have created a policy position unpopular to moderate voters, which may have ultimately motivated Democrats to turn out in the 2022 midterm elections.

Republican candidates had associations with strong pro-life stances in line with their party platform following the *Dobbs* decision. Conversely, Democrats held their stance on *Roe* and the previous status quo. Additionally, the politically moderate or independent voters who identify with the freedom framing around abortion access might have found a home in opposition to the so-called extremity of the GOP abortion platform.⁹ With this change, many voters, especially those with weak or nonpartisan inclinations, largely reacted in opposition to Republican abortion platforms rather than explicitly supporting the Democratic abortion stance.

Pure Issue Voting

Moral issues such as abortion, when the positions of the two political parties differ significantly, could engage politically inattentive voters. Political wedge issues with conflict provided straightforward targets for the media to engage with and promote easily (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024). While political scholarship varies regarding the validity of issue voting, the issue of abortion post-*Dobbs* differentiates itself due to its complicated appeals to autonomy, privacy, and freedom. Abortion quickly became an issue with little room for nuance following *Dobbs* due to its appeals to broader American sentiments. “In its simple American form, the language of rights is the language of no compromise. The winner takes all, and the loser must get out of town” (Ainsworth and Hall 2011, p. 9).

When *Roe* stood as the legal standard nationwide, it received broad support from the American electorate (Pew Research, 2022). Greater engagement with political conflict over abortion increased awareness and information (Goren & Chapp, forthcoming 2024). While abortion coverage was sparse immediately following the original *Roe* decision, media coverage increased as the political parties gradually shifted away from their original positions on abortion. As the media framed the issue as a partisan conflict in the age of readily available news, popular media energized interactions with their content by including these topics in various formats. The political issue became very relevant despite little federal legislation regarding the issue. Media framing and its emotional appeals could then influence public opinion.

⁸ *Negative partisanship* refers to the political mobilization fueled by opposition to the opposing political faction (Abramowitz 2019, p. 150).

⁹ GOP represents the acronym for the Republican Party, standing for Grand Old Party.

Contextual Political Environment

The context in which abortion emerges as an issue in a campaign is important for the strength of its effects on it. It might matter how candidates related to abortion issues contextually in the midterm elections. Female candidates who are against Republican mentions of abortion could have strengthened the Democratic vote share. The connection between the female candidate and being a Democrat may help explain the stereotype of higher compassion issue competency among female candidates (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993 p. 141–143).¹⁰ Therefore, a candidate's sex may affect electoral outcomes within their state's political environment.

Next, if abortion became a campaign issue and a Republican candidate campaigned on the pro-life position, or an abortion ballot measure existed, and there were no existing protections for abortion, these conditions could have a relationship with increased Democratic vote share. States with existing legal protections for abortion may have had a relationship with higher Republican margins of victory. Statewide abortion referendums broadly resulted in pro-choice results across the country in the 2022 midterms (Abortion Policy, 2022).

While more information did not change vote choice for partisan elections, this phenomenon was not continuous for nonpartisan elections (Broockman & Kalla, 2023, p. 1), potentially supporting the narrative explaining the pro-choice electoral strength in states like Michigan, where abortion does not have legal protection, and which had an abortion ballot measure. It also suggests that Republican overperformance in states like New York is due to the enshrining of legal protections for abortion. Competitive races have had higher campaign knowledge and political sophistication, resulting in economic decisions surrounding vote choice (Gomez & Wilson 2001, p. 911; O'Cass & Pecotich, 2005).

Loss aversion might have played a role in decision-making surrounding voting on abortion issues.¹¹ If a state enshrined abortion, there was less risk associated with electoral outcomes for abortion access. *Roe's* establishment for over 50 years solidified the right to abortion access in the United States. With *Dobbs's* elimination of this protection, voters might have seen abortion referendums, in tandem with state abortion policy, as an opportunity to prevent any further losses to abortion protections by state law. The results of contested abortion ballot measures further apply these theories because voters recognized the status quo of *Roe* and generally felt confident in its protections. The presence of abortion ballot referendums and the perceived risk of electing Republicans on the issue might have caused high levels of uncertainty (Berinsky & Lewis 2007, pp. 12–13; Liñeira & Henderson 2021, p. 542). The effect could have been enough to sway vote choice and motivate voters towards Democrats. This logic may apply to the codification status of abortion rights, as loss aversion theory

¹⁰ Compassion issues refers to issues like healthcare and poverty (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993, p. 141).

¹¹ This concept refers to the generalization that loss carries more weight in decision-making than gains carry (Eckles and Schaffner, 2010, p. 2).

relied on the assumption that voters were sophisticated and knowledgeable about the risks associated with state-level policies, which can be extrapolated to national-level elections.

The prominence of abortion as a campaign issue following *Dobbs* could have cross-pressured voters due to the state environment around abortion. Voters in conservative and liberal states voted to protect or strengthen abortion access in ballot referendums during 2022. Did this voting behavior extend to the election of congressional candidates? Perhaps voters with lower awareness about abortion policy accepted another abortion framing and were susceptible to the appeals of the opposing party (Hillygus & Shields, 2014, p. 105; Guntermann & Lenz, 2021, p. 28). These appeals would not apply to all voters but would highlight voter complexity on issues that may deal with privacy, mandates, and freedom frames.

Dobbs's overturning of *Roe* could have mobilized abortion-related turnout during the election cycle through the contextual political environment, including ballot measures and the legal status of abortion. State context regarding abortion could have affected races on a state level versus national trends. Some scholarship would contradict this claim, indicating that issue voting does not influence vote choice but instead focuses on the cross-pressures that may influence undecided voters or increase turnout among cross-pressured voters. However, Druckman (2009) contends that campaigns matter; *Dobbs* might have mobilized turnout for pro-choice voters, considering the implications of *negative partisanship* mentioned earlier.

Campaign Websites

The candidates in this election targeted voters in many ways, but campaign websites provided the broadest overview of their platforms and strategies (Druckman 2009, pp. 357–358). Unlike microtargeting online and mailers, campaigns could not personalize their campaign websites. Campaign websites were a good source of campaign information because they function to accessibly present candidates to all voters. Campaigns may emphasize another campaign advertisement form (i.e., online and TV), but campaign websites are a direct source of the campaign and its priorities. Collecting data from targeted political advertisements could create a political environment that is more polarized and extreme than how campaigns frame themselves in advertisements to voters. By making the campaign about abortion and requiring the Republicans to respond, Democratic candidates played into the novel contextual environment surrounding abortion.

A limiting factor of excluding targeted advertising is that targeting advertising represents information voters encountered more frequently (Druckman, 2009, p. 358). Campaign websites are an optional way for voters to engage with candidates. Unlike social media or television advertising, anyone who accessed a campaign website sought it out. It is challenging to say whether this medium was the most effective tool for seeking candidate extremity

or positioning. Nevertheless, the accessibility of the websites makes them an innovative tool for conducting political research in the digital age.

Literature Review Summary

The literature suggested three hypotheses. First, Democratic candidates included abortion in their platforms more frequently than Republican candidates did, on their respective campaign websites. The Democratic Party adopted the position of strengthening the previous status quo, namely *Roe*, in contrast to the pro-life Republican position.

The second hypothesis predicted that Republican abortion platforms, as measured on their campaign webpages, increased Democratic vote share due to *negative partisanship*. The contextual political environment, shown by the presence of an abortion referendum, the legality of abortion statewide, and the candidate's gender, could have strengthened the size of that effect. Voters made this determination according to the principles of loss aversion, especially when a campaign invoked the opposition's opinion.

Finally, the contextual political environment might have affected vote choice, including the presence of abortion ballot measures or the legality of abortion on the state level. Voters acted according to the principles of loss aversion, particularly in high-information environments surrounding a possibly cross-pressuring issue that invokes mandates and freedom framing.

Data & Methods

Overview

Our study analyzed the frequency statistics of candidates using abortion rhetoric as a campaign issue by the party, using their respective campaign websites. Next, a regression between election results and the contextual environment of the state's abortion environment, including abortion codification and abortion ballot measures, analyzed whether a relationship exists between these variables.¹² Dummy variables described a district's abortion environment. These variables disentangled the effects between candidate performance in the 2022 midterm and abortion rhetoric and its political environment. A regression between these variables and election results indicated any possible effects. These variables interacted with dummy variables representing abortion issue stances on campaign websites: GOP Talk, DEM Talk, the legality of abortion, and the presence of abortion ballot initiatives. These variables existed in a model that accounts for factors like incumbency and PVI to isolate the effects of the independent variables.¹³

12 A regression is a statistical analysis that determines if a relationship between two variables exists and, if it does, the strength and significance of the relationship.

13 PVI stands for *Partisan Voting Index* and refers to the Cook Political Report's district lean measure, indicating how a congressional district votes on average for Democrats and Republicans. A +0.5 Republican lean district is a very close congressional district that has a 0.5% advantage towards Republicans, for example.

Text Data Collection

The primary data came from congressional campaign websites of the 2022 midterm election House of Representatives candidates. Student researchers in a Political Science seminar course collected text data from federal House campaign websites and coded it. The website text data included every campaign website for Democratic and Republican candidates in the House of Representatives.¹⁴ After finding each candidate's website, student researchers coded each campaign website. Students coded each campaign website by collecting text from Congressional websites into TXT files from every home page (if applicable), candidate biography page, and policy issues pages, labeled by topic. After students collected the data, the advising faculty researcher consolidated similar issue pages and cleaned up extraneous or duplicate variables.

Measuring Dependent Variables

The dependent variable of the first hypothesis was the existence of abortion issue pages. A dummy variable was assigned for each GOP and DEM candidate, indicated by "0" for no mention of abortion issues and "1" representing the mention of an abortion issue. Keywords trigger the dummy variable, as detailed in the independent variable section of the methods. The dependent variable for the remaining hypotheses was election results, coded by a margin of victory for Democratic or Republican candidates. Results would reflect the margin of victory for candidates. Democratic margins of victory had negative integers, indicating the percentage of their electoral victory. Republican margins had positive results. Our study utilized several independent variables, as determined by this paper's literature review, to understand the effect of abortion campaign rhetoric and its state context on the dependent variable of election results. Results data came from verified news outlets, including the New York Times "U.S. House Election Results" pages (2022) and "Abortion on the Ballot." (2022)

Election results were the dependent variable because they are subject to different factors, like how candidates performed in the political environment surrounding abortion. A significant limitation of the dependent variable choice of election results was that they only considered quantitative results measured against a qualitative marker. The information on campaign websites only included issue stances and the candidate's biography. Additionally, using election results as a dependent variable could be misleading, as they were a general reflection of the broad sentiments of the electorate. Any issue may not have been singularly responsible for electoral results in a specific congressional race. The experiment attempted to mitigate these effects by including the PVI and incumbency variables in the construction of the model.

14 The operational definition of a campaign website is a website with a distinct URL for the 2022 House campaign, not including government websites or social media pages and accounts.

Measuring Independent Variables

The independent variable relates to abortion issue pages by party affiliation. The frequency with which campaigns address abortion issues was determined using text data from congressional campaign websites. A statistical coding program determined the presence of abortion-related pages by searching for keywords in context among campaign website data text. Words pulled from the campaign websites were as follows:

“pro-choice,” “pro-life,” “abortion,” “unborn,” “pregnant*,”¹⁵
“prochoice,” “prolife,” “fetus,” “pro choice,” “pro life,” “roe,”
“reproductive,” and “dobbs.”

Subsequently, the words indicated a “life” or “choice” frame. These frames came from the literature, and are synonymous with the party positions. The abortion dictionary received intercoder reliability by comparing terms with the Political Science seminar cohort. The words displayed represent explicit mentions of abortion. Words like “woman” or “healthcare” could apply to other issue statements, so this experiment relied on explicit mentions of abortion policy stances rather than vague references to a candidate’s positioning.

The subsequent independent variable of the state-level abortion environment demonstrated the most variance and was the hardest term for which to create a consistent variable. Determining an objective scale for the state environment around abortion was challenging due to differences in state law. While the measure could not perfectly capture a state’s environment, including ballot measures and the codification of abortion was a more objective measure to assign with dummy values to describe different political environments. Our study constructed two dummy variables to indicate the state-level variables. The first dummy variable represented the presence of a statewide abortion ballot measure. The information about abortion ballot measures came from the *New York Times* “Abortion on the Ballot” election data (2022), highlighting the different ballot measures nationwide. If any abortion ballot initiative existed, regardless of its intent, it received a “1.” Conversely, any district in a state with no abortion referendum received a score of “0.” This study did not include the intentionality of the ballot measures, as they were irrelevant to the hypothesis or scope of this study.

Constructing an abortion state-level variable used a variable coded for several measures. First, the variable considered the codification of abortion, indicated by an integer. “1” reflected the explicit codification in the state’s constitution or law or protected by the state’s Supreme Court. “0” represents the absence of any legal standard, and “-1” indicates that abortion is illegal in that state. The legal status of abortion came from the *Center for Reproductive Rights* (2022) and the *Guttmacher Institute* (2022).

¹⁵ The asterisk codes for different word endings, so that the program accounted for variations like pregnant, pregnancy, etc.

With the initial national-level modeling completed, an additional dummy variable represented a district's state for the multilevel modeling to measure state-level effects. Each state received a numeric label dependent on alphabetic order, beginning with Alaska getting "1" and ending with Wyoming receiving "50." These multilevel models illustrated the state environment in which the congressional races exist. Multilevel modeling differentiated state-level effects versus district or candidate-level effects. The modeling determined the context of the state environment for abortion access. Additional modeling measured congressional-district-level effects in all districts and swing districts, operationally defined as the coded election results between -10 and +10 for Democrats and Republicans.

The statistical modeling program *R* merged this data. The Seminar research students coded the names of the text data to match the congressional district numbers, making a merge between congressional districts and candidates straightforward. The election results, dummy variables representing abortion ballot initiatives, and the legal status of abortion were merged with the "Talk" variables by congressional district.

Results

Table 1

Frequency of Abortion Issue Webpages

Party	Yes (1)	No (0)
DEM Talk	243	64
GOP Talk	158	277

Frequency of Abortion Issue Pages

These findings support the first hypothesis of this study: that Democratic candidates will mention abortion issues on their campaign websites more frequently than their Republican counterparts. Keywords indicate the presence of an abortion page. Democrats decisively mention abortion-related issues and keywords more on their campaign websites than Republicans. Many different frames exist about abortion issues on these websites, but this paper does not distinguish among these frames. The results come from the list of keywords in the methods section and reflect the frequency of candidates talking about abortion issues by including that language.

*State Abortion Environment and Election Results***Table 2*****Campaign Rhetoric, State Abortion Environment, and Election Results***

Variables	DV: <i>Election Results</i> (Margin of Victory)	Subset: <i>PVI between (-10) and</i> (+10) (<i>Competitive Seats</i>)
Incumbent	0.70468	-0.4482
DEM Talk	1.09787	1.7321
GOP Talk	-3.40126*	-3.8234*
Abortion Ballot	-1.88524	-1.5678
Codified	-0.69315	0.6435
PVI	1.90187***	2.069****
Abortion Ballot: Codified (Interaction)	3.6749	3.7546

Significance Indicators: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .01$ **** $p < .001$

Model Statistics:

Multiple R -squared: 0.8426, Adjusted R -squared: 0.84

F-statistic: 325.7 on 7 and 426 DF, p-value: $< 2.2e-16$

The regression output displays varying support for the hypotheses. The variable representing Democratic mentions of abortion issues is insignificant across conditions. However, Republican mentions of abortion significantly affect vote share robustly across many conditions. Across various models, including different interactions between state environments and the presence of interactions between campaign rhetoric by Democrats and Republicans, mentioning abortion issues on campaign websites by Republicans correlates negatively with election results. The finding indicates that with the presence of Republican abortion rhetoric, Democratic vote share increases by a coefficient of about -3, or 3 percentage points, within several different models and contexts. Our study demonstrates this finding to be consistent across all competitive districts. The subset in Table 2 displays results for a subset of data limited to districts with PVI values between -10 and +10, representing congressional districts decided within a margin of less than 10 points towards Democrats or Republicans. The coefficient is slightly larger in competitive districts, with 3.8 points toward Democrats versus the overall effect of 3.4 points toward Democrats.

The results demonstrates that Republican abortion platforms generally increase Democratic vote share robustly and that interactions between Republican abortion platforms and contextual effects, like abortion referendums and female candidates, strengthen this effect. A significant relationship exists between election results and the presence of Republican abortion platforms interacting with the presence of an abortion ballot initiative. The same finding occurs between election results and Republican abortion platforms with the presence of a female candidate. These interactions strengthen Democratic vote share with a coefficient of about -6 for the candidate gender and about -10 for the abortion ballot initiative conditions¹⁶. These findings suggest that when female candidates and Republican abortion platforms interact, Democratic vote share increases by about six points. Similarly, when abortion ballot initiatives interact with Republican abortion platforms, Democratic House candidate vote share increases by about 10 points.

These findings illustrate that abortion ballot measures and codification status do not have a significant relationship with election results themselves. If the conditions were to have significance, their effect size would be smaller compared to the presence of Republican abortion platforms. These findings support the hypothesis that *negative partisanship* might motivate voters and that contextual factors like ballot referendums and female candidates might increase this effect. However, there is no support for increasing the Democratic vote share when abortion is illegal, or vice versa for the Republican vote share and legal abortion.

The PVI score has high significance across conditions and in every model for this study. Strong PVI correlations are not surprising, considering the nature of the district lean measure's purpose. The *r*-squared for this model is high, at around .84, suggesting the robustness of my findings. The high *r*-squared illustrates that this model displays trends for as much as 84% of the data.

Multilevel Modeling: State Environments

The state-level multilevel model does not yield new information to further support the hypotheses any more than the national-level data. Our study runs a multilevel model to measure the effect of the Republican mentions of abortion on the state level. The GOP Talk variable correlates to state-level results with a *t*-value above 1.96. Modeling included the different interactions, including interactions between codification status and abortion ballot measures.

The multilevel model ran regressions grouped by state. The GOP talk variable again has a significant relationship with election results and a *t*-value over 1.96. The interactions between abortion ballot measures and GOP talk have statistical significance, with a *t*-value over 1.96. While GOP talk generally predicted election results in a negative direction (higher Democratic vote share), this is not true for all states.

¹⁶ The interaction term between the GOP Talk and Abortion Ballot variables has a significant relationship, with a coefficient of -10.64923 and a *p*-value less than .01.

Discussion & Conclusion

Support for the hypotheses from this study varies. Abortion appears essential to the midterm narrative. Republican abortion messaging contributes to Democratic vote share, in line with the expectations of the literature review. The *Dobbs* decision appears to motivate pro-choice voters against the Republican position on abortion. Although Democrats decisively mention abortion more often, leveraging *negative partisanship* against the Republican abortion position makes it a compelling campaign issue. Both writ large and in competitive districts consistently demonstrate this finding.¹⁷

The relationship between Republican mentions of abortion and higher Democratic vote share indicates that campaigns matter (Druckman, 2009, pp. 353–358). A possible takeaway from this election is that voters punish congressional Republicans for their abortion stance if they talk about it. Democrats mention the issue more because their stance is relatively more popular than the position of their Republican counterparts and pressures Republicans to take a stance on it. Republicans may have a significant electoral liability with this issue, and thus are at an advantage not to include their contemporary abortion platform in their campaign. However, this narrative cannot exist exclusively, as other policy, economic, and social issues influence vote choice. As the Republican position moves farther away from *Roe*'s legal precedent, voters seemingly respond negatively to this messaging considering *Dobbs*.

The “GOP Talk” effect is consistent across the entire dataset and different modeling, such as the multilevel state model that includes different environmental variables. Competitive districts demonstrate greater statistical significance, further implying that Republican messaging on abortion turns off voters, especially in competitive congressional districts. The contemporary Republican *pro-life* frame in the literature review appears electorally ineffective. A follow-up study could determine whether the extremity of abortion positioning was integral in this trend. More research is necessary to explore if specific rhetorical arguments drove this effect or if studies can attribute this finding to the national Republican abortion platform.

The context in which Republican abortion messaging exists is essential to the strength of the effect. While our study finds a mixed effect regarding the significance of the *loss aversion* theory, abortion's legal status or the presence of an abortion ballot initiative do not reliably predict election results alone for partisan congressional races. Broockman & Kalla (2010) and this study assert that voters distinguish between partisan races and nonpartisan. Voters demonstrate *loss aversion* in their decision-making regarding their votes on the abortion referendums, per the *pro-choice* direction of every state referendum in this midterm election. Yet, the relationship between state referendums and vote choice is only significant when Republican House candidates talk about abortion, associating themselves with the *pro-life* side of the referendum. Future studies could analyze the effect on partisan state legislature or state executive

17 Defined as $PVI - 10 \leq x \leq 10$

positions and see if these findings extend to those candidates.¹⁸ Perhaps voters only use economic decision-making when a risk of losing valued protections exists.¹⁹

Voters likely do not consider a state's abortion codification status unless it appears on the ballot. Abortion is now a state issue, and specific state-level knowledge requires a high level of political sophistication. Perhaps voters separate partisan federal congressional races from state-level policy and candidates, and only punish Republicans for their federal views on abortion. The findings of the multilevel state model are consistent with this theory. Instead, voters likely do not engage with abortion in a contextual sense unless an abortion referendum physically appears on the ballot, and when they oppose the House Republican candidate's position. Candidate gender is similar in that it does not motivate voters alone but perhaps has a role in a larger context.

Hillygus & Shields (2014) write about cross-pressures at the state and district level that can affect vote choice. While our study hypothesizes that the state context of abortion might influence election results at the state level, the results surrounding the abortion ballot initiatives variable seem to indicate that this is the case only when Republicans campaign on abortion. Once the model controls for district lean, the party, and incumbency, the state-level variable of abortion law does not significantly correlate with increases in Democratic vote share.

This finding supports the evidence that voters do not consider state abortion law when they vote for congressional candidates. Therefore, cross-pressures do not apply to partisan House races but may compound with economic voting for nonpartisan elections. The cross-pressure theory would only apply when abortion is a campaign issue for the Republican, combined and strengthened by it as a campaign issue on the ballot or when a female candidate is present. Logically, this theory makes sense because contentious campaigns often reflect high information, and knowledge regarding the legal status of abortion in any state requires a high level of political sophistication.

Nevertheless, these findings suggest that voters do not vote in partisan races dependent on their states' legal or political status of reproductive healthcare. In the current hyper-partisan context of American politics, *negative partisanship* is high. It is likely that voters already sort themselves on issues like abortion, despite any cross-appeal campaigns made in their messaging. However, this finding is confusing, considering Democratic wins of independent voters nationwide in 2022 and the *pro-choice* direction of all abortion ballot referendums. Voters likely distinguish partisan races from the ballot measures, and the state context regarding abortion only applies to direct ballot initiatives. Besides cross-pressures and economic voting, this explanation unusually suggests high voter sophistication.

18 Partisan races such as Governor, State Attorney General, Secretary of State, etc.

19 "In its simple American form, the language of rights is the language of no compromise. The winner takes all, and the loser must get out of town" (Ainsworth and Hall 2011, 9).

The interaction between the Abortion ballot variable and GOP talk variables, with a slightly wider effect than GOP talk alone, undermines this narrative, suggesting that some effects could enhance a district's environment but did not consistently predict election results. Multilevel models on the state level suggested that Republican mention of abortion may significantly predict a higher Democratic vote share, though it is essential to avoid generalization to all state contexts. Future research could explore the effects of different Republican abortion messaging on electoral results. Republican abortion platforms robustly correlating with higher Democratic vote share in the 2022 congressional elections may indicate a shift in public sentiment towards their decades-long stance on abortion. Future research could analyze specific rhetorical arguments and their correlation, if any, to electoral outcomes.

Conclusion

The presence of Republican abortion platforms generally increases Democratic vote share across the conditions of this study. It would be worthwhile to investigate if any distinction emerges regarding the importance of specific stances. Additionally, studying the rhetoric used by Democrats could further the findings of this study by analyzing how, or if, Democratic candidates engage with the Republican platform to leverage their position against Republican candidates using *negative partisanship*. Perhaps Democrats appeal to the popularity of the *Roe* precedents; a follow-up study on each party's candidate rhetoric would provide further clarity to the messaging used in the 2022 campaign.

The limited scope of congressional campaign websites can inform the limitations of this study. The website campaign messages may not reflect the messages that voters receive. Did mailers emphasize abortion more, or less? Was the language at partisan rallies more reflective of their positioning? Did Republican abortion messaging get a lot more exposure in political attack advertisements? How much money did campaigns spend on abortion literature and messaging? These experiments could yield the effects of *negative partisanship* that this study implicates. It is also certain that candidates alluded to their abortion stance using coded language not captured by the explicit dictionary in this study.

Campaign websites may serve different purposes today than when Druckman (2009) established their functionality as a broad sweeping of campaign platforms. Future research could expand past traditional measures of voter communication to social media campaigning. Are specific campaigns more accessible via different modes of communication? Do campaigns take this into account when creating a campaign website? These considerations are essential in a high-information and fast-moving political environment. Considering the entirety of a campaign's "digital footprint" is paramount in determining the effectiveness of campaign messaging.

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