Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 16: Microfoundations of Public Opinion

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1. Readings

   Zaller, "The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion"

   Kinder and Kam, "Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion"

   Sears et al., "Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting"

How do we form political opinions?

$\longrightarrow$

Readings

Axiom 1: Reception Axiom
The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue,
the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a
word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue.

Axiom 2: Resistance Axiom
People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

Axiom 3: Accessibility Axiom
The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.

Axiom 4: Response Axiom
Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.

The **Receive-Accept-Sample** (RAS) Model:

1. Individuals **receive** political signals

2. They **process** those signals according to the axioms above

    - **Accept** if informed, consistent signal

    - **Accept** if uninformed (generally)

    - **Reject** if informed, inconsistent signal

3. In forming political opinions/survey responses, they **sample** from the information in their heads, drawing more from recent considerations

    - **Average** over all considerations (giving recent ones more weight)

Political scientists seek **constructs**, or central organizing ideas, to reduce complexity of people's opinions.

A good construct is:

1. Sufficiently general

2. Distinct from other constructs

1. **Ethnocentrism** as a useful construct: summarizes in-group favoritism along various dimensions

- Lazy vs. hard-working

- Intelligent

- Patriotic

- Self-reliant

- Trustworthy

- Violent

2. **Ethnocentrism** is distinct from other constructs

TABLE [2] The Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Social and Political Predispositions

	Full sample	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics
Partisanship	−0.06	−0.00	0.02	0.03
	(4923)	(3931)	(598)	(394)
Limited government	−0.03	−0.09	−0.05	−0.02
	(4947)	(3951)	(604)	(392)
Egalitarianism	−0.19	−0.18	0.07	−0.02
	(4974)	(3964)	(609)	(401)
Ideological identification	−0.07	−0.07	0.02	0.03
	(4945)	(3951)	(599)	(395)
Social trust	−0.08	−0.17	−0.02	−0.07
	(4898)	(3901)	(602)	(395)

NOTE: Table entry is the Pearson correlation coefficient. Number of observations appears in parentheses.
SOURCES: 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 NES.

Four issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs

2. National health insurance

3. Busing

4. Law and order

Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. **Guaranteed jobs**

   1.1 The respondent or other head of household was currently unemployed or temporarily laid off

   1.2 The family was worse off financially than a year earlier

   1.3 The recession had hurt the respondent's or family's employment situation

2. National health insurance

3. Busing

4. Law and order

Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs

2. **National health insurance**

   2.1 Having no current insurance coverage

   2.2 Having current insurance coverage too low to cover major medical costs

   2.3 Having excessively costly insurance premiums

3. Busing

4. Law and order

Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs

2. National health insurance

3. **Busing**

   3.1 Had a child in public school

   3.2 Did not have a child already riding a bus to school

   3.3 Lived in a district with busing happening or rumored

   3.4 Lived in an all-white neighborhood

4. Law and order

Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs

2. National health insurance

3. Busing

4. **Law and order**

   4.1 Had recently been victimized by crime

   4.2 Felt their own neighborhood was not safe to walk alone in at night

   4.3 Stayed away from certain parts of town because of fear of crime

Symbolic attitudes:

1. Liberal-conservative ideology

2. Party identification

3. Racial prejudice

Table 1. Predictors of Support for Specific Policies

	Guaranteed Jobs	National Health Insurance	Busing (Whites only)	Law and Order
Self-interest Index[a] (yes)				
1	.01	.11***	−.06	.06**
2	−.01	.10***	−.01	.00
3	.06**	.03	−.02	.04
4	−	−	.01	−
Symbolic attitudes				
Liberal-conservative ideology (liberal)	.21***	.25***	.13***	−.22***
Party identification (Democratic)	.08***	.10***	−	−.05*
Racial prejudice (tolerant)	−	−	.31***	−.25***
Demographics				
Sex (male)	−.07***	.01	.03	.19***
Age (years)	.01	.06**	.00	.07**
Education (years)	−.08***	.01	.07**	−.01
Income ($)	−.11***	−.11***	−.06*	.06**
Race (white)	−.23***	−.07	−	.05*
Southern origin	−	−	.02	−
R^2	.215	.147	.150	.221
N	1965	1727	1562	1955

Source: Computed from data collected in the 1976 election study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

Note: Entries are betas.

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