'Wag the Dog' Media: Does the President Distract the Public When Issuing Executive Orders?

An Exploratory Empirical Analysis

Alper Sukru Gencer

Political Science Department
Washington University in St. Louis

October 9, 2020

Washington University in St. Louis

About Myself

My name is Alper Gencer. I am a second year Political Science PhD student at Washington University in St. Louis. I had my BA in Political Science (2017) and Economics (2017) and MA in Political Science (2019) in Koc University, Turkey.

Some of my interests are

- Comparative Politics/IR:
  - Political Accountability and Delegation,
  - Perceived Corruption and Voting Behaviour,
  - Protests and Social Movements.
- Political Methodology
- Formal Theory

'Wag the Dog' Media: Puzzle

- Have you ever thought when the President issues an executive order?
- Does the President face any constraint or pressure from media while issuing these orders?

Figure: President Donald Trump signing an executive order

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

- Presidents strategically issue executive orders,
- In the timing of executive orders, they are likely to take into consideration factors like:
  1. current public mood and approval rates (Kaufman & Rogowski, 2018),
  2. whether the government is divided or not (Djourelova & Durante, 2019), and
  3. whether media is already occupied with some scandalous or disastrous events that make public attention distracted (Djourelova & Durante, 2019),

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

- Djourelova and Durante (2019) also asserted that it is also possible that *"presidents may proactively try to influence the media agenda through their actions or statements so as to 'create distracting news'"* and evade the public attention while issuing executive orders.

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

In other words, this *agenda setting theory* suggests that

1. because Presidents prefer the distracted public attention when issuing orders,
2. if they have the agenda setting capabilities,
3. then they would use them to make sensational/provoking statements that are irrelevant to executive orders
4. before or after issuing orders.

Thus, we could expect that the media statements of the president would be more provoking that they distract the attention. Moreover, we would anticipate that these statements owuld get more attention and reaction.

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

- President Donald Trump's presidency with his extraordinary use of media constitutes an appropriate case to test this theory.
- Based on Twitter data, I conducted an empirical analysis to test the empirical implications of this theory.

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

If the content of the tweets is different than the normal times, then the reactive statistics (likes and retweets) must be different than the usual times. And given they are provoking to distract the public attention, they must receive more like and retweets. Therefore,

- **Hypothesis 1:** *Holding others constant, the number of likes and retweets of the presidential tweets must be more at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

'Wag the Dog' Media: Introduction

For this theory to hold true, moreover, the sentiment of the presidential tweets at the time of executive orders must be more provoking (negative) than other times. Thus,

- **Hypothesis 2:** *Holding others constant, the sentiment of the presidential tweets must be more negative at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

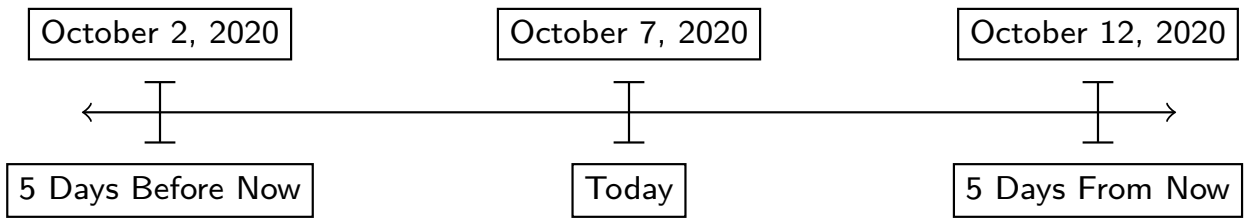
Table of Contents

'Wag the Dog' Media: Methodology

- To test these two hypotheses, I need to have data on presidential orders and presidential tweets.
- The presidential orders:
  - I collected all executive orders by web-scraping on Python `https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu`.
  - I obtained all presidential order content, number, date, and url since the presidency of Donald Trump.
- The presidential tweets:
  - Because the tweet number of President Donald Trump is more than 20,000, I had to downloaded then from the website `http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/`.
  - Each tweet entry includes tweet content and statistics about tweet likes and retweets.

'Wag the Dog' Media: Methodology

- In testing my hypotheses, I created intervals of 3, 5, 7, 11, and 15 days around the issue dates of executive orders on Python.
- For instance, I created the 11 day interval as follows:



5 Days Before Now + Today + 5 Days From Now = 11 Day Interval

- Then I featured each tweet with 1 if it is within these intervals and 0 otherwise.

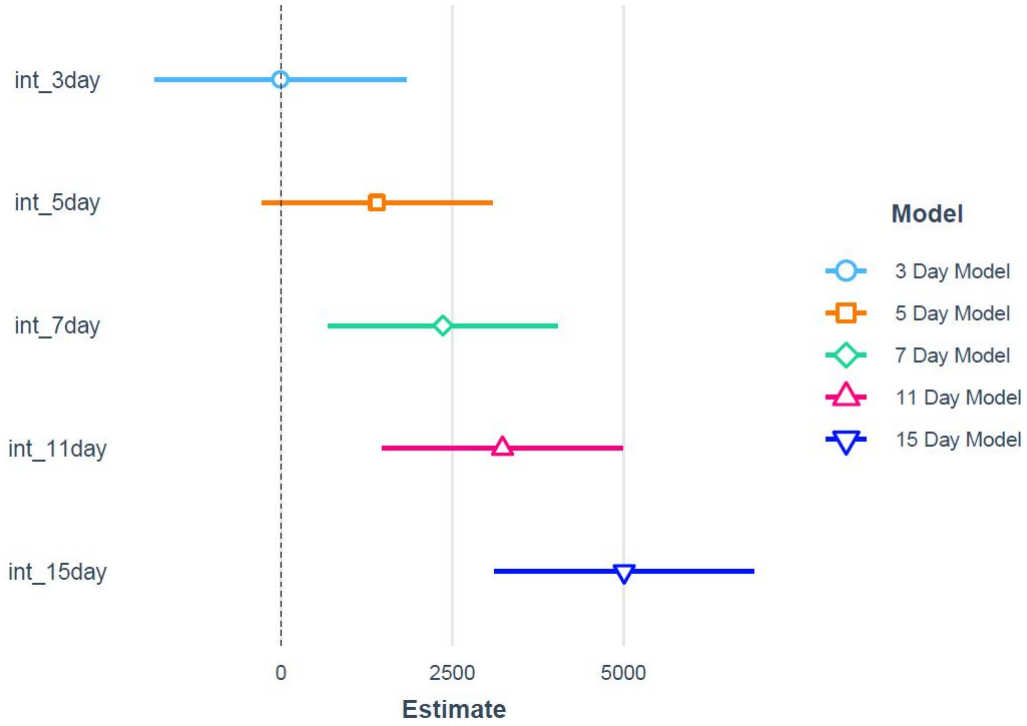
'Wag the Dog' Media: Methodology

- To test the second hypothesis with sentiments, I trained a logistic regression to predict the sentiment labels on Python.
- In doing so, I using a training and validation corpus composed of 10,000 tweets (5,000 positive and 5,000 negative - almost 99% accuracy).
- Then I used this predictor to estimate the sentiment of the presidential tweets that I pre-processed on Python (including, tokenization, removal of stop words, punctuation, etc.)
- Finally, I ran basic linear analysis to test my hypotheses on R.

Table of Contents

'Wag the Dog' Media: The Explanatory Empirical Analysis

Figure: DV = Number of Likes

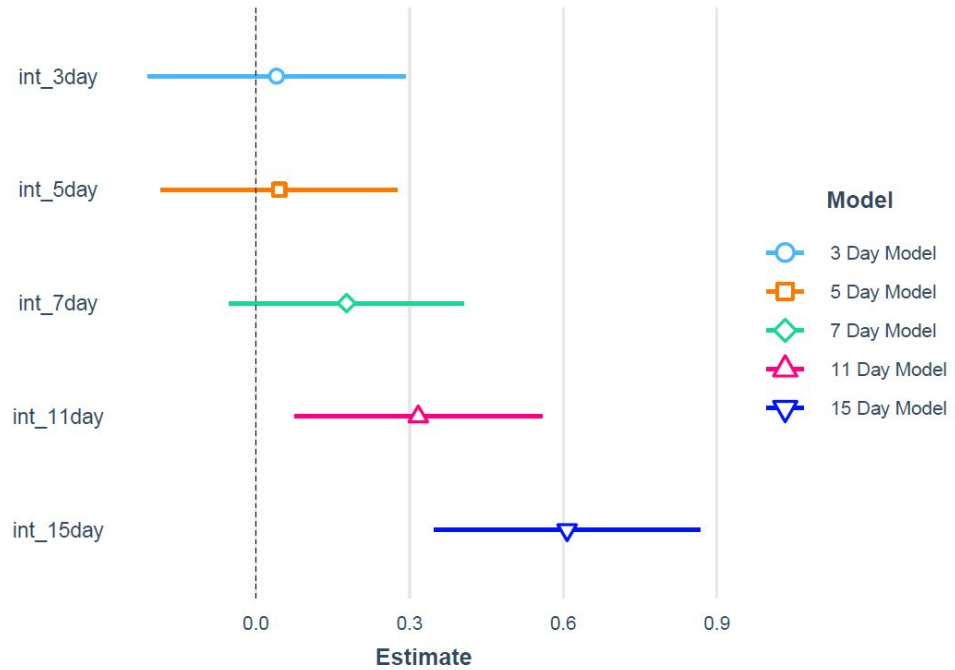


Hypothesis 1a: *Holding others constant, the number of likes of the presidential tweets must be more at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

Washington University in St. Louis

'Wag the Dog' Media: The Explanatory Empirical Analysis

Figure: DV = log(Number of Likes)

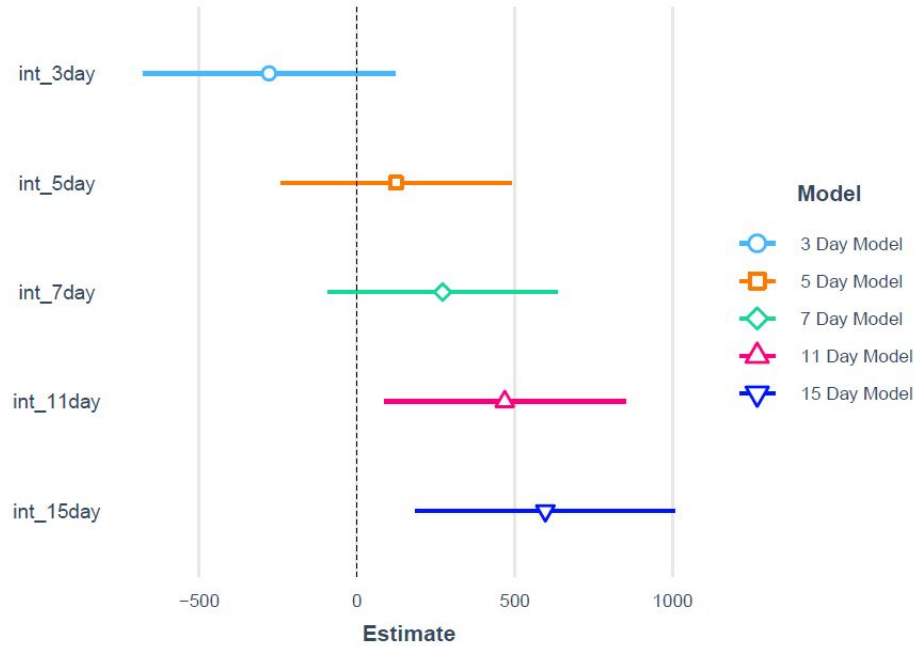


Hypothesis 1a: *Holding others constant, the number of likes of the presidential tweets must be more at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

Washington University in St. Louis

'Wag the Dog' Media: The Explanatory Empirical Analysis

Figure: DV = Number of Retweets

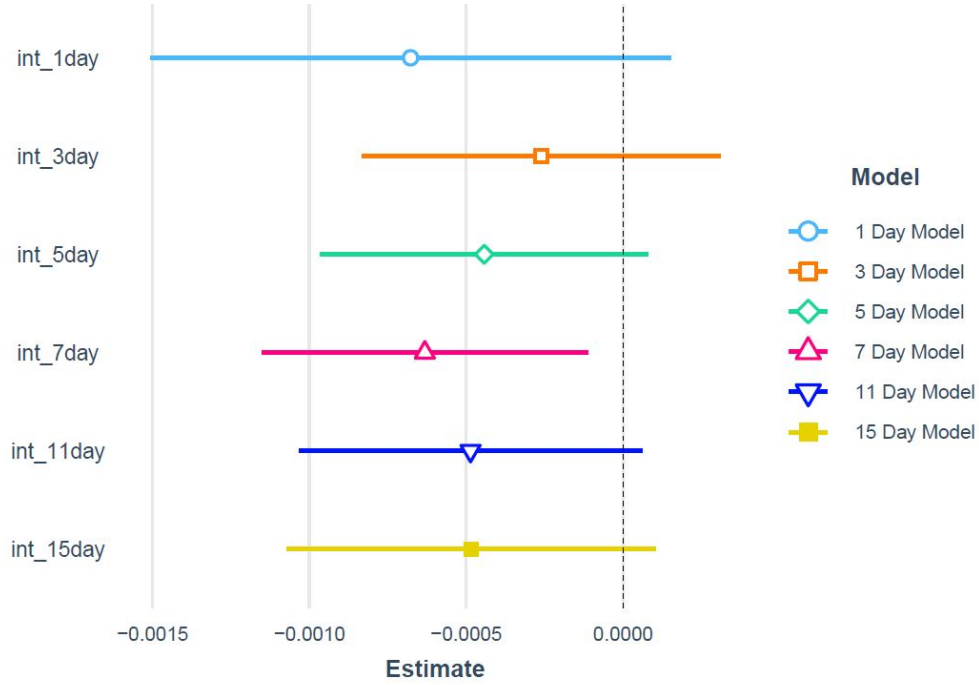


Hypothesis 1b: *Holding others constant, the number of retweets of the presidential tweets must be more at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

Washington University in St. Louis

'Wag the Dog' Media: The Explanatory Empirical Analysis

Figure: DV = Sentiment Score



Hypothesis 2: *Holding others constant, the sentiment of the presidential tweets must be more negative at the times of executive orders than the other times.*

Washington University in St. Louis

Table of Contents

'Wag the Dog' Media: Further Implications

- Further accuracy test for sentiment scores of the Trump tweets.
- Better identification strategy to capture rather causal relationship than the covariational one.
- Testing these hypothesis for the presidency of Barack Obama to increase the external validity of the results.

'Wag the Dog' Media: Thank you!

- I would like to thank to
  - Patrick Cunha David and Ben Noble for their support in Python and
  - Prof. Justin Fox and Prof. Andrew Reeves for their substantive suggestions.
- And thank you for your listening!

You can access all codes and data that I created from my GitHub profile:
`https://agencer.github.io/aboutme/`
`https://github.com/agencer/Summer2020PythonProject_Gencer`