Misreporting of ideological self placement to rationalize party preferences

Classical theories of rational or economic voting assume that individuals' candidate or party preferences are a function of the distance between their ideal point and the candidate's ideal point in an issue space (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1989). However, research suggests that many other factors such as party identification (Campbell et al., 1960) and other heuristics to simplify the complex political reality (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006), personality traits of candidates (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; King, 2002) or non-verbal cues like physical appearance, voice frequency, or charisma (Olivola and Todorov, 2010, for an overview) influence vote choice.

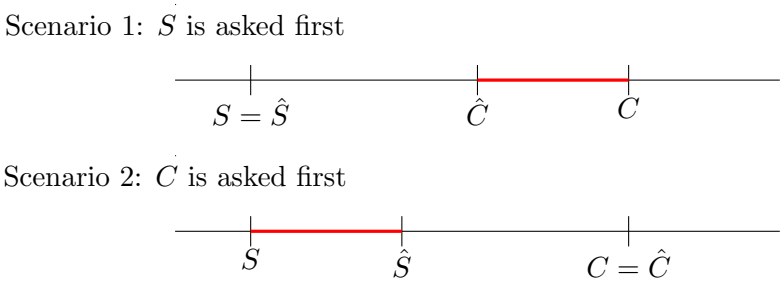
Empirical support for issue based proximity preferences often relies on high correlations between issue proximity and vote choice in observational survey studies. Several authors have argued that these correlations are in part due to projection or rationalization: preferences for candidates are a causal precedent to the issue positions (Campbell, 1983; Rahn et al., 1994; Lenz, 2009). In analyses of mostly panel data, those studies found a reciprocal causal relationship between issue proximity and candidate evaluation.

This relationship can be seen as a form of rationalization to decrease cognitive dissonance. Issue proximity is a reasonable logical criterion to use when deciding which candidate to support. As research in social psychology shows, people prefer to view themselves as logical and coherent once they are forced to reflect on their preferences (Wilson 1989). If contemplation about the candidate leads to a seemingly incoherent preference (i.e. the preference for a candidate is based on different criteria then the issue proximity), cognitive dissonance arises (Festinger et al., 1957; Brehm and Cohen, 1962). To mitigate this dissonance, individuals might rationalize their candidate preference by changing their own position or their perception of the candidate's issue position.

I propose a design consisting of two experiments to test whether this process of rationalization occurs. Subjects are presented with real world political parties and are asked for whom they would vote. After that, subjects in the treatment groups are asked to place themselves as well as their preferred party on an ideological dimension (e.g. liberal-conservative). I define the individual's true position (S) as the position the respondent would report when asked to place only herself on

the ideological dimension and the party's true position (C) as the position the respondent would assign if asked to rate only the party. I denote the reported positions as $\hat{S}$ and $\hat{C}$ for individual and party positions respectively. Figure 1 displays graphically the two scenarios how rationalization can occur. If the question for S is asked first and the question for C is asked second, $\hat{S}$ should equal S and $\hat{C}$ should be closer to S than C. If the order of the question is reversed, $\hat{C}$ should equal C and $\hat{S}$ should be biased towards C. In other words, depending on what question they are asked first, I expect that subject's bias their second answer in order to decrease the distance between themselves and the preferred party. Each experiment is designed to estimate one these two forms of rationalization bias.

Figure 1: Different scenarios for rationalization bias



S 'True' self position, C 'True' perceived candidate position, $\hat{S}$ reported self position, $\hat{C}$ reported candidate position. In red the convergence bias.

To measure the distance between the two positions in the control group, the self position is indirectly measured through prediction from answers to political issue questions. Besides the experimental groups, there will be an additional training group, that is asked to report S and additionally answer questions about recent and controversial political issues. From this data a predictive model (random forest) will be trained [1]. The issue questions will then be asked in the experimental groups and the predictive model is used to get an estimate S^* of the 'uncontaminated' S for each individual.

The bias in $\hat{S}$ is measured by the distance between the prediction and the reported position in the treatment and control group of the first experiment. The bias in $\hat{C}$ is measured by comparing the distance between prediction and $\hat{C}$ in the control group and the distance between $\hat{S}$ and $\hat{C}$ in the treatment group in the second experiment. A preliminary power analysis indicated that

[1] I select the predictors from the set of variables that according to a machine learning algorithm best predict ideological self placement in the American National Election Study. For additional information: https://github.com/flinder/rationalization.

large samples for an assumed effect size of 10% reduced absolute distance a sample size of at least $N = 500$ is necessary[2]. Amazon's service MTurk provides a good platform to collect data on big samples with reasonable cost (see budget for details.)

Although this study focuses on candidates and voters, it's potential findings and the research design are relevant for research on behavioral deviations from the predictions of classical rational choice theory in psychology and economics. The candidates are objects over which individuals have preferences. The position in the ideological space is a rationale according to which choices could be made. The research design presented here could be extended to other objects of choice and other rationales in order to explore if individuals change their rationales to justify previously made decisions. For example, consider the choice between products. Individuals choose products for a variety of reasons: the quality of the product, aesthetic aspects or influence through advertisement. If individuals are asked to choose a product, and are then asked to rate themselves and the product on some rational criterion, a similar convergence effect might be observed.

[2]The power analysis is available on my github account: https://github.com/flinder/rationalization.

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