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GOV 2060 Final Exam

Short Answer Questions:

1. Episodic framing is when media outlets cover issues more related to the specific piece of news than the broader social theme. It usually has the effect of making viewers blame the individual more. For example, if the media is reporting on violence at a protest in an episodic way, they might frame it as a bunch of ‘bad guys’ making our democracy unsafe; a more thematic coverage might go into detail on *why* the protest was happening in the first place and what might have made people angry enough to complete acts of violence.

2. Professionalism is the degree to which a position in legislature is like a full time job, simply stated. The United States congress, for example, is one of the most professional in the world, since seats are considered a full time job with a salary. In state legislatures, however, many are less professional, with congress only meeting a few months of the year. These so-called citizen legislatures are usually not as competitive, and incumbents in professionalized legislatures are re-elected at a higher rate. Thus, professionalism helps keep healthy competition between candidates, which is thought to bring them closer to the desires of citizens.

7) Up for debate, there is evidence that strict voter ID laws suppress voter turnout. The paper by Hajnal et al. concluded that voter turnout was suppressed in voters of colors compared to white voters in strict voter ID states . This claim is portrayed by analyzing data from the 2006-2014 CCES . The paper also controls for other demographic and social characteristics that drive voter participation but ultimately land at the same result--that strict voter ID laws do cause voter suppression. However, this result is hotly debated, as other scholars argue that this result is caused by other demographic, economic, and social factors within the state that have nothing to do with voter ID laws.

8) Maine was the earliest state in NE to pass ballot initiatives and among one of the first in the country! Starting in 1836, people could approve state amendments by a vote in Maine. There have been a number of close ballot votes in Maine over time, such as the vote to legalize marijuana that passed at just over 50% of voters in 2016. Maine also has the “People’s Veto” which is the veto referendum process; citizens just have to get enough signatures first and it will appear on the ballot. This has happened many times since 1910.

4) The role of political parties in the government is to serve the needs of politicians who want to pass legislature and promote the policy goals of interest groups. Elected leaders and appointed government officials thus shape party policy goals. The government does this with the help of the “party as organization” which refers to the institutions that administer party affairs (such as the Democratic National Committee). What these organizations do is recruit candidates they think will run competitive races, often persuading them with the promise of raising money on behalf of them. Finally, the party in the electorate is the citizens who identify with the party; their function is to express their opinion on various policy reforms so that in an ideal world the electorate would try to reflect those opinions!

Essays

1. Do political ads work?

Since the 2010 Citizens United act, spending on political advertising has been steadily rising in Presidential and Congressional races. Take the 2020 Senate races, where there were many competitive races and record breaking ad spending. If I lived in Montana, I wouldn’t have been able to watch The Bachelorette without a political ad break! Many of these races were Democrats hoping to snag seats from incumbent Republicans--the polls looked promising, and leading up to election day it seemed like maybe these ads were working! But alas, Democrats lost in crucial states, and they now need a landslide victory in Georgia’s runoff elections to take control of the Senate. This leaves skeptics wondering, why even bother with all this ad spending if the incumbents are just going to win? Aren’t we too partisan for this to ever work?

The measure of whether an ad works is of course whether it changes peoples’ opinion on the endorsed candidate and/or which candidate they vote for. Although I too am a skeptic, I will argue that political ads indeed work, but that it is difficult to measure to what degree advertisements work and why. First, voter turnout has been steadily increasing along political ads. Second, even if the effects of ads are very small, this could be the deciding factor in a close race. Finally, I would like to discuss how difficult it is to actually measure the impact of advertisements, so the answer to this question ultimately remains a bit gray.

This year’s election saw the highest turnout in over a century. It also saw more political advertisements aired than ever before. In the mid 1960s through the early 2000s, voter turnout declined--there are a number of reasons given for this, ranging from less trust in the government and the fall of political machines to a loss of a sense of civic duty. However, the last two decades have actually had higher voter turnout, with 2020 continuing the trend. Many states that had competitive Congressional races saw particularly high spikes in turnout from 2016. While there are of course many factors pushing people out to vote, this year also saw incredible grassroots fundraising. And of course, a big chunk of this fundraising was spent on advertising, leading to the conclusion that the ads themselves played at least some non-zero role in increased turnout!

We read multiple papers that discuss the small impact that advertisements have on a candidate’s appeal. In “Going Negative or Positive: Isolating the Effects of Advertising Tone,” Franz et al. ultimately concluded that negative and positive ads both give a very small boost to favorability, but that it is hard to find a real correlation between vote choice and ad viewing. The paper also discusses how negative ads can be successful in lowering the candidate’s favorability, but mentions a need for greater research (slightly off topic, but worth mentioning how the rise of negative ads also comes with concerns about spreading false information about candidates).

In addition, the paper by Hill et al. concludes that the impact of both positive and negative advertising is small, but that this small effect can still play a potentially large role in election outcomes. This study replicated heterogeneity by testing a wide range of ads on 34,000 people, giving them a very broad range of issues and demographic groups.

The main takeaway is that even if each ad holds a tiny weight on favorability, the aggregate impact of many ads may amount to something more substantial. It is also worth noting that advertisements may play a larger role in local elections where citizens have less knowledge on the candidates. In that case, an ad may actually provide useful information to voters about the candidates stance on policy issues. Social media also provides a fascinating platform for political advertisements, especially on young voters. In this way, online advertising can be very powerful in engaging younger voters. Online platforms also allow candidates to create ads for themselves by creating social media personas for themselves that people can follow (Trump’s twitter feed, anyone?!). If candidates post about trending topics, or campaigns post about the candidate, then voters may become more engaged in following them.

All of this speculation begs the question of how we actually measure the impact of ads. The studies we read, while insightful, are only a mere drop in the bucket of the thousands of advertisements that drown us during an important election cycle. One difficulty that arises is being able to control different factors in a given study. For example, if I were to replicate the study done by Franz et al trying to isolate the effect of tone on positive versus negative ads, I would want to test this on a wide range of political issues. If I use just one ad on say gun control, even if both ads are the same except for tone, I ultimately am still only talking about one issue. Surely there are voters who don’t care about gun control or have a very fixed agenda. Ideally, I would want to test a wide range of ads on a wide range of people. But then this becomes a chicken-or-egg game because with more factors comes more variables to account for! Thus, the best we can really do is get some hard data from existing studies and hope to get more funding for larger-scale research. All of this will be very interesting after the 2020 election.

The short answer is that political ads do work, even if the impact is very small. Yet, the bigger questions remain. Is there an upper limit for the impact of ads? In other words, should we limit the amount that can be spent on advertising? What advertising strategy should a candidate vye for in a close race? How do negativity and polling data relate to one another leading up to a close election? As with most open-ended questions, I ended with more questions than I began with! I would love to see a study comparing 2020 turnout with political advertising!

1. What are the tradeoffs in democratic values in designing election reforms?

Right now, it feels like every political reform seems to take on an extreme partisan lean. You want more immigration control? You must be a Republican. You support trans rights? Democrat. You want lower taxes and less government regulation? Get away from me you neoliberal shy Trump voter!!! Such typecasting is a sad reality--while not everyone fits nicely along every partisan line, we often judge each other as though we do. This not only hinders deliberation across party lines, but it also prevents laws from being passed in a divided Congress. While we have focused on the actual campaign process and candidate issues for much of this class, it is important to take a step back and think about broader reforms. It sometimes feels like we will never leave this two-party system trap and all the divides that come with it. This leads me to broader election reforms, those that go beyond specific political issues and towards the future of a more egalitarian election system.

There are three main democratic values that our electorate strives to achieve: free choice, political equality, and deliberation (textbook chapter 14). In short, this means that citizens elect their political representatives, that the rules of elections apply equally to all candidates/voters, and that candidates are able to discuss and debate on issues in a way that is open to the public. We also have to protect free speech, which is why it is so difficult to pass laws which control how an election is run. All of this makes political reform in a mature democracy like the US inherently difficult and problematic. These democratic values are themselves contestable (defining free speech is a doozy in itself!) and have different consequences with regard to political power. All (or most) Americans may agree on the most broad and basic requirements of democracy, but there are infinite valid implementations of these democratic values. It is always a trade-off. If specific rules and institutions confer disadvantages to certain groups, then should we make a reform even if it would hinder free speech?

For example, consider the controversy over strict voter ID laws. The lawmakers believe that fraud is an issue in our electoral system and believe that these laws will make fraud happen less often. Opponents retort by saying that fraud is not actually a major issue and that these laws only serve to suppress minority votes. Here we of course have a partisan divergence, with the divergence being the political consequences (fraud vs voter suppression). Since it is difficult to measure which is hindering the Democratic process more, the tradeoffs in reform proposals fire from both sides. The fundamental question is whether strict voter ID laws actually serve the interest of the many, or only the interest of the political elite.

We can talk about trade-offs in another example of election reform--campaign financing. Throughout the last 40 years, we have seen institutional designs for limiting spending come and go, with loopholes along the way. When Buckley v Valeo argued that money is speech and funding could not be limited, opponents of this argued that corruption was justification for limiting first amendment activities such as raising/spending money. All this eventually culminated in citizens united in 2010, which basically gave interest groups unlimited fundraising power and plenty of loopholes around things like the magic word test. At the end of the day, the current campaign finance framework is contestable and still has serious practical consequences. The tradeoff of stricter regulations is that this goes against freedom of speech, but the corruption of the current structure has just amounted to lobbying and interest groups that regulation-supporters argue prevents political equality and deliberation!

Other large-scale reforms such as the National Popular Vote and reforming the redistricting process are also stuck in limbo waiting to be passed by Congress. Opponents of a NPV argue that New York and California would ‘swamp’ smaller states (oh this sounds familiar…) and that it would be hard to get an official tally of the popular vote that isn’t fraudulent. Opponents of redistricting of course say that it would just lead to redistricting that favors Democrats. While all of this is up for debate, reality is that we will not know the true democratic tradeoffs to these reforms until they are enacted and we can actually see their effect on the majority of the population. Our judicial system makes it easy for laws to be locked in, with a high bar for constitutional amendments. Attempts at campaign reform are often halted by divergent interests and conflicting ideals. The true challenge in passing reforms is how to serve the interests of the many rather than the few who ultimately control the courts and Congress.