MACS 30200

PS1 Part 2

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Grimmer, J. (2016). Measuring Representational Style in the House: The Tea Party, Obama, and Legislators' Changing Expressed Priorities

1.

The research question is how legislators use communication to define the type of representation they provide to constituents and how the definition of representation changes in response to changes in electoral pressure and changes in party control of Congress.

2.

The author uses text as data method and adopts a large collection of Congressional text, every House press release (nearly 170,000) from 2005 to 2010.

3.

It has no reference to theory. This article is more data-driven. It uses a statistical topic model that measures legislators' expressed priorities.

4.

The paper is a combination of a descriptive study and an identification exercise. It describes the definition of the type of representation provided by legislators and the change of it using unsupervised learning. It also identifies the correlation between credit claims and the changes in press representation.

5.

(1) Method

To measure the expressed priorities, the author uses a large collection of House press releases and a statistical topic model. To be more specific, to apply statistical models to the collection of press releases, he firstly preprocesses the texts representing its content as numbers through a standard set of techniques and models the collection of legislators' press releases as a mixture of von-Mises Fisher distributions and variational approximation, working with a normalized version of the count vector. Then he builds a topic model with a two-layer hierarchy that estimates granular and coarse topics, along with legislators' attention to those topics. Finally, he validates the accuracy of topic model using regression.

(2) Results:

The paper shows that expressed priorities rely on a credit claiming/position taking spectrum. And where legislators fall on this spectrum depends not only on the one they represent, but also relates to broad political changes. After the 2008 election, House member changes their expressed priorities--Republicans abandon credit claiming and articulate criticism towards Obama, while Democrats use credit claiming and defend the federal stimulus. However, even after responding to the changing conditions, legislators largely maintain the same broad style. The author also demonstrates the strategic ways legislators change

how they communicate with constituents and demonstrates the utility of computational tools for studying representation.

6.

(1) You could add a tree diagram of your functions in part three: A Model for Nested Topics, by which, you could demonstrate the relations of functions clearer.

(2) For part five, I suggest you add some figures to explain why you chose to plot the proportion of press releases 'Health Reform', 'Budget' and 'President' rather than other topics. You could use a histogram of the changes of the amount of press releases of all the topics here.