"Elected on Friday, Assassinated on Saturday": Text-Analyzing Political Assassinations

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In the historiography of political thought, radical thinkers are often characterized as those who "push the boundaries" of the range of acceptable ideas and opinions in a given society at a given time. While formal modeling of strategic "spatial voting" in political science has led to influential results like the Median Voter Theorem, less work has been devoted to assessing strategic behavior among political thinkers at the "margins" of political thought, whose aim is not to *represent* public opinion (and thus win votes) but to *influence it*. In this work, therefore, we posit a "Median Survivor Theorem", a point on a given ideological spectrum beyond which influential political thinkers are vastly more likely to be assassinated, and then estimate this point via a text-analysis of the topical trajectory of prominent radical thinkers' speeches before and after assassination *attempts* and, especially, before successful assassinations. After demonstrating the efficacy of this approach in terms of ability to predict assassinations from textual content, we zoom in on individual cases, measuring the ideological dissimilarities between thinkers' public and private statements and assessing the degree to which their public "position-taking" exhibited strategic compromises with broader social-discursive boundaries.

If I was president, I'd get elected on Friday, assassinated on Saturday, buried on Sunday, then go back to work on Monday.

Wyclef Jean (2004)

Introduction

Spatial metaphors abound in the historiography of political thought. Political scientists, for example, often employ the notion of an "Overton Window" to denote the range of acceptable ideas and opinions within a given society at a given time, such that "radical" thinkers can be characterized in turn as those who push the boundaries of this range.

These metaphors then underlie a slew of formal and empirical research endeavors in the social sciences, such as "ideal point estimation" (Poole and Rosenthal 1985), whereby voters' positions

along the Overton Window are represented as points on the real numberline ($\mathbb{R}$), while electoral candidates strategically choose platform positions with respect to the range of their constituents' ideological points. Several influential results emerge from this framework, such as the Median Voter Theorem, which states that two "rational" candidates competing for votes from the same constituency will adopt nearly-identical platforms (differing by an infinitesimally-small magnitude ε), at exactly the median of their constituents' ideological points in $\mathbb{R}$, since any move away from this point will reduce the proportion of captured candidates below 50%.

In this work, we employ this framework to analyze the *strategy* of radical thinkers, and find that indeed there is a "Median Radicalism" point whereby those thinkers whose speech moves beyond this point drastically increase their likelihood of being assassinated. After presenting our methodology and findings, we then use more "in-depth", small-N evidence to assess the degree to which radical thinkers make these strategic choices in a *conscious* manner: that is, the extent to which broader cultural *"enforcement"* of the Overton Window (e.g., in media or activist discourse), in conjunction with the fear of assassination, leads such thinkers to curb their radicalism in public statements relative to their private writings (e.g., in personal journals or correspondence with fellow radical thinkers).

Data (MVP Version)

As an instance of developing a "Minimum Viable Product" (MVP), we begin our study in an exploratory mode. We operationalize popular notions that Martin Luther King's foray into particular strands of discourse – concretely, his increasingly-urgent calls to his constituency to focus on and oppose the United States' genocides in Vietnam and Indochina more broadly – "led to" his assassination[1]. At this stage, however, we also note that "stopping" with just the single case of Martin Luther King would subject our study to the bias of *selection on the dependent variable.* Thus, while we choose cases more methodically in **?@sec-methods** using a statistical matching approach, here we choose Black Panther Party chairman Huey Newton as our "control" case (Newton 1973), as a political thinker whose radical thought also brought him to the forefront of the black liberation movement only a few years after King's murder, but who was not assassinated until decades later[2].

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[1]Our emphasis in this initial stage thus "dovetails" with a related body of historical research on the tactic of nonviolence in the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. See, especially, Cobb (2014).

[2]Newton was murdered in 1989, at the age of 47, in Oakland, California.

Methodology

Results

Conclusion

References

Cobb, Charles E. 2014. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible.* Basic Books.

Newton, Huey P. 1973. *Revolutionary Suicide: (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition).* Penguin.

Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1985. "A Spatial Model for Legislative Roll Call Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 29 (2): 357–84. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111172.

Wyclef Jean. 2004. "President."

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