

Problem Set #2

MACS 30200, Dr. Evans

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Paper: Measuring Representational Style in the House: The Tea Party, Obama and Legislators' Changing Expressed Priorities by Justin Grimmer

a. Research question

How legislators define the type of representation they provide to constituents and how this definition of representation changes in response to shifts in electoral pressure and changes in party control of Congress.

b. Data Source

A collection of nearly 170,000 House press releases: every press release, from each House office, from 2005 to 2010.

c. Theories referenced to interpret the data

To show the reliability of data, he uses his past research in 2013 as evidence instead of theory. He states that Grimmer (2013) shows that press releases contain politically relevant content not found in floor speeches and that press releases have a direct effect over the content of newspaper stories and constituent evaluations.

As for his methods to interpret the data, he also referenced to his past researches in 2010 and 2014. The 2010 study justifies his choice of text as data method for this paper, and the other study provides foundations for his application of a model that estimates a hierarchy of topics and how legislators allocate their attention to each level of topics (Blaydes, Grimmer and McQueen, 2014).

d. Type of study

This study is a combination of descriptive study and some identification. It's a descriptive study because his aim is to describe how representation of legislators change as electoral pressure and party control of congress shift.

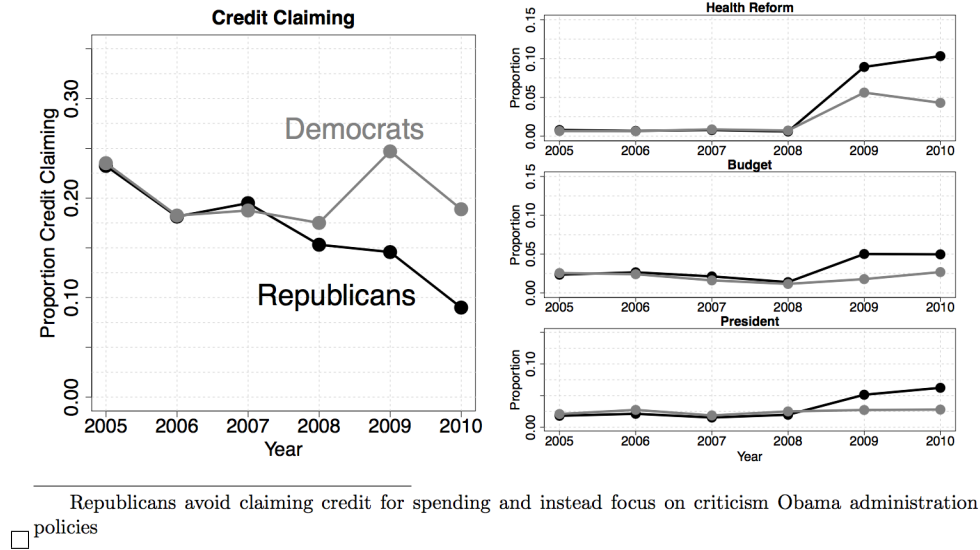
He first uses hierarchical topic modeling to get topics of each release and groups the releases according to their topics. Then, his attempts of identification come in. He computes some descriptive statistics for each topic and observes the changes at different time. For example, before and after Obama's inauguration. With this approach, he's able to notice some trends but not necessarily a rigorous identification of causal relationship.

e. Computational methods

He uses hierarchical topic modeling with two layers to obtain grouping of releases. Specifically, the model has 44 granular topics and 8 coarse topics. After interpreting the result and manually label the topics, he computes descriptive statistics for each topic and observes the changes at different time. As shown in these plots below, after Obama took office in 2008, there is a change in representation for both parties. While both parties have similar proportion of topics including "credit

claiming", "health reform", "budge" and "president", there are significant changes in their proportion for both parties. Democratic party has a larger proportion of credit claiming, while republicans discuss more about health reform, budget and president. He also shows that legislators' attention to the coarse topics are broadly stable over time, even though there is a shift in rhetoric after the 2008 elections. This demonstrates legislators' ability to respond to changing institutional and electoral conditions, but this is a change on the margin, from legislators' persistent strategies.

Figure 3: Republicans Avoid Credit Claiming and Instead Attack Presidential Policies



f. Suggestions

1. To answer his question of change in representation in different political environment, Grimmer basically only depends on his analysis of Obama's election. His arguments would be stronger if he could also show some shifts in representation while other changes in political environments occur.

2. His arguments of change in representation are mostly based on the shifts of the proportion of topics discussion for each party. As we know, topic modeling has been used as a general tool to identify topics within a corpus; however, its accuracy of identifying specific proportions of topics in texts has not been validated. I'm not sure how accurate these measurements are and how he could validate them. I guess, the author could at least provide confidence intervals for these measurement so that we have some references on the reliability of these statistics.