

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 15: Microfoundations of Public Opinion

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Overview

1. Readings

Lupia and McCubbins, “The Democratic Dilemma”

Zaller, “The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion”

Kinder and Kam, “Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion”

How do people form political opinions?



Today we will think about the deep mechanics of political opinion formation (and the implications for democracy).

Readings

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Lupia and McCubbins, “The Democratic Dilemma”

Information vs. Knowledge

- Full information is impossible
- But *knowledge* is enough for informed decisionmaking
 - **Knowledge:** the ability to predict consequences from actions
 - Traffic analogy
- How do voters acquire knowledge?
 1. Own experience
 2. Experts
- What can happen when citizens turn to experts?
 1. Nothing
 2. **Enlightenment**
 3. **Deception**
- The latter two require **persuasion**. When are voters persuaded?

When Does Persuasion Happen?

Some determinants of the perceived trustworthiness of a source:

1. Costly effort
2. Penalty for lying

Persuasion as a Principal-Agent Problem

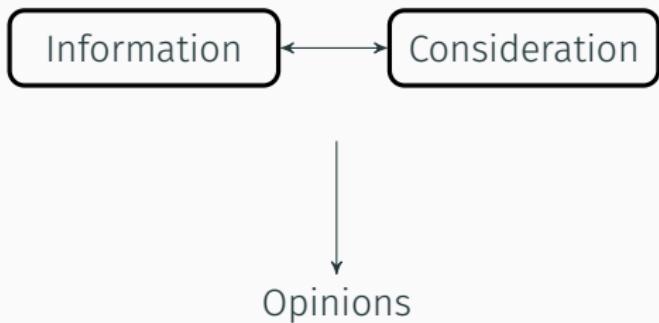
Principal: Uninformed citizen; **Agent:** informed expert

Discussion: When does delegation work well? When does it work poorly?

Readings

Zaller, “The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion”

Zaller's Model of Opinion Formation



Axiom 1: Reception Axiom

The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend—in a word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue.

Axiom 2: Resistance Axiom

People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

Axiom 3: Accessibility Axiom

The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.

Axiom 4: Response Axiom

Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.

The Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) Model:

1. Individuals **receive** political signals
2. They **process** those signals according to Axioms 1-2 above:
 - **Accept** if informed, consistent signal
 - **Accept** if uninformed (generally)
 - **Reject** if informed, inconsistent signal
3. In forming political opinions/survey responses, they **sample** from the information in their heads according to Axioms 3-4 above:
 - **Average** over all considerations (giving recent ones more weight)

Discussion

How could one test the RAS model empirically?

What are the implications of the RAS model for political polarization?

Readings

Kinder and Kam, “Us Against Them:
Ethnocentric Foundations of American
Opinion”

Political Constructs

Political scientists seek **constructs**, or central organizing ideas, to reduce complexity of people's opinions.

A good construct is:

1. Sufficiently general
2. Distinct from other constructs

Stereotypes

Stereotyping is central to how humans process information and make sense of the world:

- Typologies → cognition, abstract thinking, language

But when applied to *other people*, stereotyping becomes problematic:

- Asymmetry: maintenance of in-group nuance and flattening of out-group to one-dimensional stereotypes
- In-group favoritism and out-group discrimination

Ethnocentrism is distinct from other constructs

TABLE [2] The Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Social and Political Predispositions

	<i>Full sample</i>	<i>Whites</i>	<i>Blacks</i>	<i>Hispanics</i>
Partisanship	-0.06 (4923)	-0.00 (3931)	0.02 (598)	0.03 (394)
Limited government	-0.03 (4947)	-0.09 (3951)	-0.05 (604)	-0.02 (392)
Egalitarianism	-0.19 (4974)	-0.18 (3964)	0.07 (609)	-0.02 (401)
Ideological identification	-0.07 (4945)	-0.07 (3951)	0.02 (599)	0.03 (395)
Social trust	-0.08 (4898)	-0.17 (3901)	-0.02 (602)	-0.07 (395)

NOTE: Table entry is the Pearson correlation coefficient. Number of observations appears in parentheses.

SOURCES: 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 NES.

Discussion

We have encountered three theories of how political beliefs are constructed:

1. Elite persuasion/cue-taking
2. Receive-accept-sample
3. Ethnocentrism

Are these theories contradictory? Can they all be happening at once?
Is there overlap between them? Are they contingent? How could we test which ones are correct or dominant?