What Can We Learn About How Political Campaigns Activate Attitudes?

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▶ How do campaigns affect voters?

▶ Attitudes may be formed early in life, leaving little room for persuasion

▶ Instead, campaigns may *activate* or *prime* attitudes (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948; Valentino, Hutchings and White, 2002)

▶ When an issue is activated or primed, voters bring candidate evaluations in line with their attitude on the issue

Example: Racial Views and Voting, 2008-2016
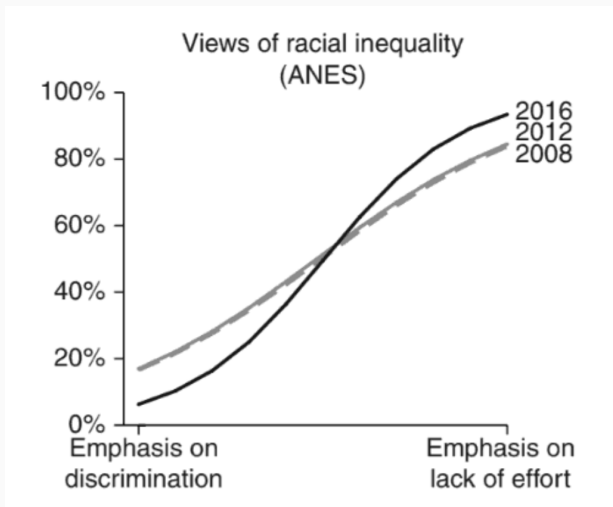
Sides, Tesler and Vavreck (2019), Figure 8.6

▶ Despite ubiquity of activation and priming, literature does not formalize estimands or state assumptions for inference

▶ We formalize 3 notions of activation:

   1 Activation as increase in *issue weights*
   2 Activation as *causal moderation effect*
   3 Activation as *prediction*

▶ Use our framework to study research designs

Priming in a Spatial Voting Model

[Priming research] tests whether an increase in the prominence of an issue leads individuals to increase the weight given to the issue when evaluating rival candidates or incumbent politicians. They measure such increases by regressing presidential approval or vote choice on a series of policy attitudes. The coefficients from these regressions, also called "issue weights," are interpreted as reflecting the importance people place on each issue when evaluating the president or deciding for whom to vote.

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Implies a behavioral model of voter decision-making, which we formalize as a weighted spatial voting model

- ▶ Voters have preferences over many dimensions of policy
- ▶ Preferences over candidates are determined by the weighted distance between voters' ideal points and candidates'
- ▶ Different issues weighted differently
- ▶ Use the model to interpret regressions of vote choice on voters' attitudes

Spatial Voting Model Results

▶ Coefficients on issue attitude k are a combination of weights and candidates' platforms:

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▶ Single-candidate measures of approval may yield more reliable inferences about issue weights
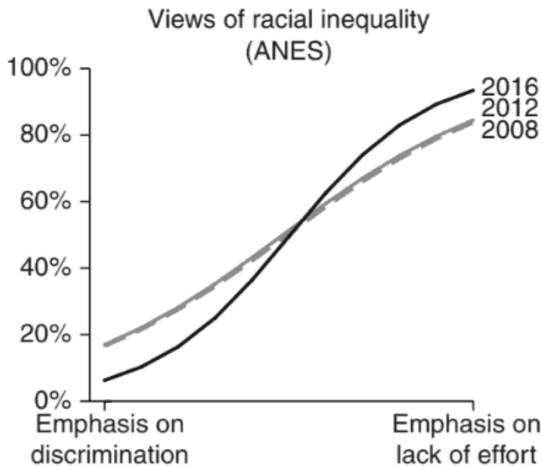
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Activation as Causal Moderation

Activation is a process where voters "acquire more information about candidates" then "evaluate candidates based on their long-standing political predispositions":

> *[Media coverage] signals to voters whether the surging candidate is "their type," and those whose beliefs align with the candidate's then lead the surge.*
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Focuses not just on issue weights, but general effect of campaign on the relationship between vote choice and attitudes.

- ▶ How would people vote if they held different attitudes?
- ▶ E.g., what is the effect on vote choice of randomly assigning people to high (relative to low) racial resentment?
- ▶ Denote potential outcomes as a function of campaigns $\mathbf{x}$ and attitudes θ: $Y_i(\mathbf{x}, \theta)$

Effects of Attitudes on Vote Choice

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► The effect of attitudes on vote choice is summarized by the *average attitude treatment effect*:

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- ▶ Identification requires ignorability (as-if random assignment) of attitudes

Effect of Campaigns on Vote Choice-Attitude Relationship

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▶ Identification requires dual ignorability: of attitudes and of campaign strategy

Views of racial inequality (ANES)
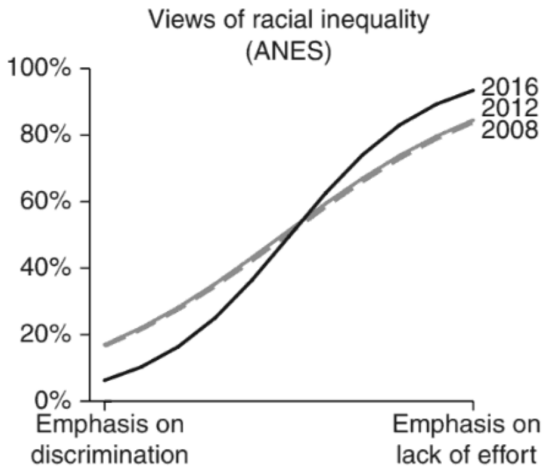
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Activation as Prediction

[G]iven President Trump's rhetoric [and] President Obama's departure . . . , it is plausible that anti-Latino prejudice could predict 2016 vote choice more strongly than 2012 vote choice.

— *Hopkins (2019)*

▶ Prediction is a more modest goal than causal inference

▶ How much better can we predict vote choice given that we know an attitude X, relative to not knowing it?

▶ Formalize this idea using Variable Importance Measures (VIMs)

▶ VIM is the expected increase in a loss function from predictions that don't use information about X

- ▶ Denote potential outcomes of predictive capacity of X under campaign strategy $\mathbf{x}$ as $Y(\mathbf{x})$
- ▶ Activation is when a campaign $\mathbf{x}'$ makes an attitude more predictive relative to a counterfactual campaign $\tilde{\mathbf{x}}$

Campaign Effects on Predictive Capacity

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- ▶ Identification requires only ignorability of campaigns

▶ We rigorously define 3 notions of activation

▶ Often need ignorability assumptions to estimate activation

▶ Ignorability of attitudes is a difficult assumption

▶ Lab/survey experiments randomizing campaign messaging or natural experiments varying campaign intensity can help ensure ignorability of campaign environment

▶ Framework organizes literature and (hopefully) helps spur innovations in research design

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