Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 16: Microfoundations of Public Opinion

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)
1. Readings


Sears et al., “Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting”
How do we form political opinions?

© Source unknown. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Image courtesy of Gavin St. Ours on Flickr. License CC BY.
Readings
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.

Zaller, John R. In The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion. Cambridge University Press, 1992. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.
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.

Zaller, John R. In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge University Press, 1992. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see [https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/](https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/).
**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.

Zaller, John R. In The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion. Cambridge University Press, 1992. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.
The Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) Model:

1. Individuals receive political signals
2. They process those signals according to the axioms 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, drawing more from recent considerations
   - Average over all considerations (giving recent ones more weight)
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
1. **Ethnocentrism** as a useful construct: summarizes in-group favoritism along various dimensions

   - Lazy vs. hard-working
   - Intelligent
   - Patriotic
   - Self-reliant
   - Trustworthy
   - Violent
2. **Ethnocentrism** is distinct from other constructs

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

**Table 2** The Relationship between Ethnocentrism and Social and Political Predispositions

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

**Sources:** 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 NES.
Sears et al., “Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics”

Four issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs
2. National health insurance
3. Busing
4. Law and order

Sears, David O., Richard R. Lau, et al. “Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting.” American Political Science Review 74, no. 3 (1980): 670–84. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.
Defining self-interested groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs
   1.1 The respondent or other head of household was currently unemployed or temporarily laid off
   1.2 The family was worse off financially than a year earlier
   1.3 The recession had hurt the respondent’s or family’s employment situation

2. National health insurance

3. Busing

4. Law and order

Sears, David O., Richard R. Lau, et al. “Self-Interest vs. Symbolic Politics in Policy Attitudes and Presidential Voting.” *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 3 (1980): 670–84. © Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see [https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/](https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/).
Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs
2. National health insurance
   - 2.1 Having no current insurance coverage
   - 2.2 Having current insurance coverage too low to cover major medical costs
   - 2.3 Having excessively costly insurance premiums
3. Busing
4. Law and order
Defining *self-interested* groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs
2. National health insurance
3. **Busing**
   3.1 Had a child in public school
   3.2 Did not have a child already riding a bus to school
   3.3 Lived in a district with busing happening or rumored
   3.4 Lived in an all-white neighborhood
4. Law and order
Defining **self-interested** groups on issues:

1. Guaranteed jobs
2. National health insurance
3. Busing
4. **Law and order**
   4.1 Had recently been victimized by crime
   4.2 Felt their own neighborhood was not safe to walk alone in at night
   4.3 Stayed away from certain parts of town because of fear of crime
Symbolic attitudes:

1. Liberal-conservative ideology
2. Party identification
3. Racial prejudice
## Table 1. Predictors of Support for Specific Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guaranteed Jobs</th>
<th>National Health Insurance</th>
<th>Busing (Whites only)</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-interest Index</strong> (yes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolic attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal-conservative ideology (liberal)</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.13***</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification (Democratic)</td>
<td>.08***</td>
<td>.10***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial prejudice (tolerant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>-.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (male)</td>
<td>-.07***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.06**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
<td>-.08***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income ($)</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.11***</td>
<td>-.06*</td>
<td>.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (white)</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R^2</strong></td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1727</td>
<td>1562</td>
<td>1955</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Computed from data collected in the 1976 election study, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan.

**Note:** Entries are betas.