Introduction to the American Political Process

Public Opinion
Campaigns

Campaign Effects

- Predictive Models
- Mobilization vs. Conversion
The Importance of Public Opinion

- Democratic systems designed to facilitate participation by the mass public
- America is a *representative* democracy
  - How much do we really want citizens to make their voice heard?
  - Are they qualified to do so?
What Is Public Opinion?

Definition:

“Those opinions held by private persons which government finds it prudent to heed.”

How Should We Measure Public Opinion?

- Political participation?
- Interest Groups?
- Opinion Polls?
Survey Research I: Random Sampling

- Who to Interview?
- Random Sampling
  - Select respondents at random
  - Sampling error and the confidence band
- What happens when you don't sample randomly?

Bad Things!
1936 Literary Digest Poll

- 10,000,000 Ballots
- 2,376,523 Returned
  - Predicted Vote for FDR: 41%
  - Actual Vote for FDR: 63%

Problem: Non-Random Sample
(more Republicans)
Vote.com Poll (March 2004)

- Iraq a year later, was it worth it?
  - Yes: 81% (11,500 votes)

- Was The House Budget Committee Right To Endorse Bush’s Push For Further Tax Cuts?
  - Yes: 86% (5,000 votes)
Should We Believe These Results?

- Are Bush’s Campaign Ads with 9/11 Images Distasteful?
  - No: 80% (28,000 votes)

- Is John Kerry's Senate Voting Record A Liability In His Bid For President Of The United States?
  - Yes: 87% (23,000 votes)
Vote.Com February 2000 Poll

- Vote for Keys: 23% - Vote for Gore 10%
- Vote for Giuliani: 91% - Vote for H. Clinton 9%
Survey Research II: Questionnaire Design

- Question Wording
- Question Order
Question Wording

- Not-so-subtle effects
  - 1982 Ohio Governor
    1. Do you Support Jerry Springer for Governor?
    2. As you may know, in 1974 Jerry Springer, who had gotten married six months earlier, was arrested on a morals charge with three women in a hotel room. Do you support Jerry Springer for Governor?
  - Push Polling
Public Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Should Federal Spending on Welfare Programs Be…</th>
<th>Should Federal Spending on Assistance to the Poor Be…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kept Same</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Question Wording

- Subtle Effects
  - Spending on social programs
- Respondent Options
  - Carter Example
- Important point: Need to pay close attention to just what it is that is being asked in opinion polls
Other Questionnaire Effects

- **Question Order**
- **Communism Question:**
  1. Do you think the U.S. should let Communist reporters from other countries come in here and send back to their papers the news as they see it?
  2. Do you think a Communist country should let American newspaper reporters from other countries come in and send back to America the news as they see it?
Citizen Competence

- Questions of competence
  - Public opinion depends on wording of questions
  - Low information?
    - Hastert – 35%
    - Thompson – 14%
  - Rational ignorance?
- Another Solution: Zaller
Understanding Question Effects

● The “Big Head” Model
  ○ Why do effects occur?
  ○ How do we decide on an answer?

● Framing and Priming
  ○ Framing: How do you look at an issue?
  ○ Priming: What is important?
Probing Beyond the Surface of Opinion

- Issue Salience and Strength
- The “Mushiness Index”
- Ginsberg
Is Democracy in Trouble

- What Do We Expect from Citizens?
- Public Opinion Constrains Politicians
- Political Participation
Case Study: The Politics of Abortion

- Question Wording Effects
- Strength of Opinion