

Memo

To: Members of the APSA Working Group on Automated Content Analysis

From: Jonathan M. Ladd, Assistant Professor, Georgetown University

Regarding: Proposal to Use Automated Content Analysis to Collect Data on News Media Coverage of the State of the National Economy

Puzzles in the Literature

Since at least the 1960s, political scientists and economists have studied the relationship between national economic conditions and citizens' evaluations of the president. Key (1968) observed that the incumbent president's party tends to perform better in presidential elections when economic conditions are favorable. Numerous subsequent studies have confirmed this relationship (Key 1968; Rosenstone 1983; Lewis-Beck 1990; Bartels 1992; Gelman and King 1993; Hibbs 2000; Bartels and Zaller 2001). But what is the individual-level causal mechanism driving this relationship? Early studies assumed this aggregate-level correlation was indicative of pocketbook voting – citizens rewarding and punishing incumbents based on their own economic circumstances (Key 1968; Kramer 1971). But subsequent studies established that the effect of personal economic circumstances was small in magnitude relative to perceptions of the state of the national economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Markus 1988, 1992). This phenomena of evaluating the president based on national rather than personal economic circumstances, known as “sociotropic” voting, has become one of the main ways in the political science literature that voters systematically hold presidents accountable for their performance in office (Fiorina 1981; Achen and Bartels 2004). However, there are at least two important puzzles that this literature has left unanswered.

First, how do voters acquire information about the national economy? A large portion of the American public is generally uninformed about American politics, especially recent events (Converse 1964; Kinder 1998b, 1998a). This is not a sign of personal vice, but may be a reasonable reaction to the low probability of any singly individual influencing election outcomes. Since acquiring political information can entail

nontrivial personal effort, unless one values politics for personal entertainment, it is reasonable to remain “rationally ignorant” of public affairs (Downs 1957). Particularly surprising in this regard is Zaller’s (2004) study showing that the *least* informed voters appear to be the *most* responsive to the national economy. The existing literature has been unable to provide an answer to the question of how these citizens acquire the necessary information to be affected by the national economy.

Second, why are voters influenced by objective conditions at all? Political psychology has documented numerous ways in which public opinion and voter preferences are influenced by news media coverage and the political rhetoric that it conveys (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992, 1996; Nelson, Clausen, and Oxley 1997; Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997; Kinder 1998b, 1998a). The media tell people both what to think (through direct persuasion) and what to think about (through priming, framing and agenda setting). A few studies have even linked people’s beliefs about national conditions with reports about those conditions in the news media (Hetherington 1996; Gilens 1999). However, evaluations of the president seem to react to national conditions even when news media coverage sends different signals. In one example of this, in the early months of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, media coverage of President Clinton was highly negative yet economic conditions were overwhelmingly positive. Public approval of Clinton during this time followed national economic conditions and remained high (Zaller 1998). Put bluntly, this reaction to national statistics and immunity to news media messages contradict political psychologists’ understandings of public opinion and persuasion.

Proposal for Data Collection

In order to try to better understand the mechanism by which the economy influences the mass public's evaluations of the president, I plan to initiate a content analysis of the tone of news media coverage of the economy. Currently, to my knowledge, there is no data on how the overall state of the national economy is depicted in the news media over time. I plan to remedy this.

I plan to start by analyzing the tone of news coverage on the economy in major national newspapers over time, preferable from about 1950 through the present. I would like to develop a time-series measure of the tone of coverage of the economy on a negative-to-positive continuum. Similarly to Jim Stimson's "policy mood" (Stimson 1999; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) or the Conference Board's "index of leading economic indicators," I hope this measure of economic news tone will be useful as both an independent and dependent variable in different studies of the role of the economy in the American political system.

I plan to start my own utilization of this data by looking at it as a potential influence on presidential approval, as measured by the Gallup Poll's presidential approval time series. A simple but telling application of these data would be to see whether actual economic statistics, like GDP growth and the unemployment rate, are better predictors of presidential approval over time than the economic news tone. If, in a time series model where both objective economic conditions and economic news tone are included simultaneously as independent variables, news tone proves a better predictor of presidential approval, the puzzle of how economic conditions affect political evaluations would be on the road to resolution. It would indicate that people are acquiring their economic information through the media. However, if objective economic conditions are

still better predictors of presidential approval, the puzzle would remain, suggesting that some more complicated mechanism is at work. (For a somewhat similar research design over a much shorter time-period, see Shah et al. 1999.)

If data collection for my measure of economic news tone proves workable, I would hope to expand the project by collecting other related time-series data. These possibly include: a measure of economic news tone on television news, a measure of economic news tone in “soft news” media sources, etc.

Conclusion

In beginning the project, I am researching alternative ways of conducting large scale content analyses. I am exploring the possibility of using automated content analysis because of its large potential savings in both time and labor. While my previous work has focused on the news media, it has largely pertained to public opinion about the media rather than content analysis. While I am familiar with some earlier work in this area (i.e. Fan 1988), I am not yet very knowledgeable about recent development in the field of automated content analysis. I hope that participation in this working group will help better acquaint me with this field and help me to learn the pluses and minus of different techniques. Thank you in advance for your participation in this group. I look forward to seeing you all in Philadelphia.

References

- Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2004. "Musical Chairs: Pocketbook Voting and the Limits of Democratic Accountability." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
- Bartels, Larry M. 1992. "The Impact of Electioneering in the United States." In *Electioneering: A Comparative Study of Continuity and Change*, ed. David Butler and Austin Ranney. New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, viii, 294.
- Bartels, Larry. M., and John. Zaller. 2001. "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34 (1): 8-20.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter. New York: Free Press, 206-261.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Erikson, Robert S., Michael MacKuen, and James A. Stimson. 2002. *The Macro Polity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fan, David P. 1988. *Predictions of Public Opinion from the Mass Media: Computer Content Analysis and Mathematical Modeling*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King. 1993. "Why Are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls So Variable When Votes Are So Predictable?" *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (1): 409-451.
- Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hetherington, Marc J. 1996. "The Media's Role in Forming Voters' National Economic Evaluations in 1992." *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (2): 372-395.
- Hibbs, Douglas A. 2000. "Bread and Peace Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections." *Public Choice* 104 (1-2): 149-180.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Key, V.O. 1968. *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kinder, Donald R. 1998a. "Communication and Opinion." *Annual Review of Political Science* 1: 167-197.
- Kinder, Donald R. 1998b. "Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics." In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Daniel Todd Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey. New York: McGraw-Hill, 778-866.
- Kinder, Donald R., and D. Roderick Kiewiet. 1979. "Sociotropic Politics: The American Case." *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (2): 129-161.
- Kramer, Gerald H. 1971. "Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964." *American Political Science Review* 65 (1): 131-143.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S. 1990. *Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Markus, Gregory. B. 1988. "The Impact of Personal and National Economic Conditions on the Presidential Vote: A Pooled Cross-Sectional Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (1): 137-154.
- Markus, Gregory. B. 1992. "The Impact of Personal and National Economic Conditions on Presidential Voting, 1956-1988." *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (3): 829-834.
- Nelson, Thomas E., Rosalee A. Clausen, and Zoe M. Oxley. 1997. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance." *American Political Science Review* 91 (3): 567-83.
- Nelson, Thomas E., Zoe M. Oxley, and Rosalee A. Clawson. 1997. "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects." *Political Behavior* 19 (3): 221-246.
- Rosenstone, Steven J. 1983. *Forecasting Presidential Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shah, Dhavan V., Mark D. Watts, David Domke, David P. Fan, and Michael Fibison. 1999. "News Coverage, Economic Cues, and the Public's Presidential Preferences, 1984-1996." *Journal of Politics* 61 (4): 914-943.
- Stimson, James A. 1999. *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Zaller, John. 1998. "Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 31 (2): 182-9.
- Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zaller, John R. 1996. "The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived." In *Political Persuasion and Attitude Change*, ed. Diana C. Mutz, Paul M. Sniderman and Richard A. Brody. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 17-78.
- Zaller, John R. 2004. "Floating Voters in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1948-2000." In *Studies in Public Opinion: Attitudes, Nonattitudes, Measurement Error, and Change*, ed. Willem Saris and Paul M. Sniderman. Princeton: Princeton University Press.