

THE TREATMENT OF POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE MASS MEDIA:

A TREND ANALYSIS

A Memorandum of Interest Submitted to the
National Election Studies Board of Overseers

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Précis

A fair amount of evidence has been collected recently which indicates striking shifts in American electoral behavior. Voters are more ideological and issue-oriented, and distinctly less likely to identify with one of the major political parties. We have as yet only incomplete explanations of these trends. Some scholars have speculated that the news media, especially television with its vivid impact on large audiences, may be playing an important role in stimulating changing opinions and beliefs.

This memorandum attempts to document the need for rigorous time-series analyses of three parallel phenomena over the period 1952 to 1976: 1) statements of political candidates and public figures, 2) media coverage, 3) the public opinion response. Extensive archives exist in all three areas. No one, however, has as yet taken the important step of content analyzing the public statements of candidates and corresponding media coverage to allow for a comparison of trends over time.

These ex post facto content analyses would be a tremendously valuable addition to the existing data files for this period and might well serve as a model for the inclusion of similar data in future ICPSR election studies.

The New American Voter

The issue-voting literature focuses on one of a number of dramatic shifts in American political behavior over the last two decades. Voters are less likely to identify themselves as strongly attached to the Democratic or Republican parties. Even among party identifiers the influence of party on the vote-decision seems to be somewhat weaker now. Voters are more likely to identify specific political issues in describing their thinking during political campaigns and these issues appear to be more tightly organized into ideological clusters. Finally, of course, there is evidence that the relative issue positions of opposing candidates has come to play an increasingly significant role in citizens' ultimate voting decisions.

Thus far, the analysis of these trends has been primarily descriptive in character. We have taken great care in conceptualizing and measuring such phenomena as levels of conceptualization, party identification, opinion preferences and issue voting, and the graphing of trends in these variables over time. But the development and testing of theories of what might have caused some of these trends has been either neglected entirely or handled rather informally. Some scholars refer to the expansion of higher education throughout this period. It is no doubt a contributing factor, although it would hardly explain sudden and dramatic shifts such as the rise of ideology and constraint in 1964. Other scholars have noted that movement away from party identification has been especially pronounced among entering cohorts of voters which suggests the importance of age and historical effects. But neither

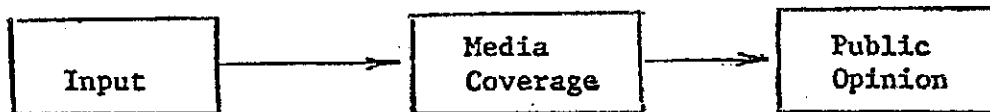
education nor cohort effects come close to accounting for some of the more dramatic shifts in ideology and issue voting during this period.

Researchers have come to conclude that the fundamental cause of changing voting behavior is an interaction between three new elements: 1) new events and issues (especially Vietnam, social protest and the "social issue"), 2) new candidates (especially Goldwater and McGovern) and, 3) the growth of the mass media (especially television). Kevin Phillips dubbed it "mediacracy"; others refer to the "new politics," "issue politics" or because of the apparent impact on the citizenry the "new American voter."

It strikes me that the time has come for a rigorous and critical examination of the New Politics/Issue Voting Hypothesis. Studies of media exposure and political interest throughout this period indicate that the public has not increased its consumption of newspapers or broadcast journalism and does not claim to be any more interested in election campaigns or politics in general. So if there has been a change it would be found in the actual content of the mass media. Have candidates come to articulate their positions on the issues much more clearly? Are reporters increasingly emphasizing the ideological and philosophical contexts of political issues and events? Are candidates and media commentators making fewer references to political parties, party philosophies and the link between parties and candidates?

A Causal Analysis of Political Trends

The thinking of voters in the 50's and 60's is no longer available to us so we are not able to return to them with refined survey instruments to more carefully assess changing attitudes and beliefs. Fortunately, however, a great deal of what the major candidates said and how their remarks were filtered and interpreted by the mass media is available in archives. We can indeed return to these records and through a refined content analysis model trace the relative emphasis on party, issues and ideology through this period of American politics. The underlying model of the analyses is straightforward enough and might be outlined as follows:



Data: Content Analyses
of candidate speeches
and statements

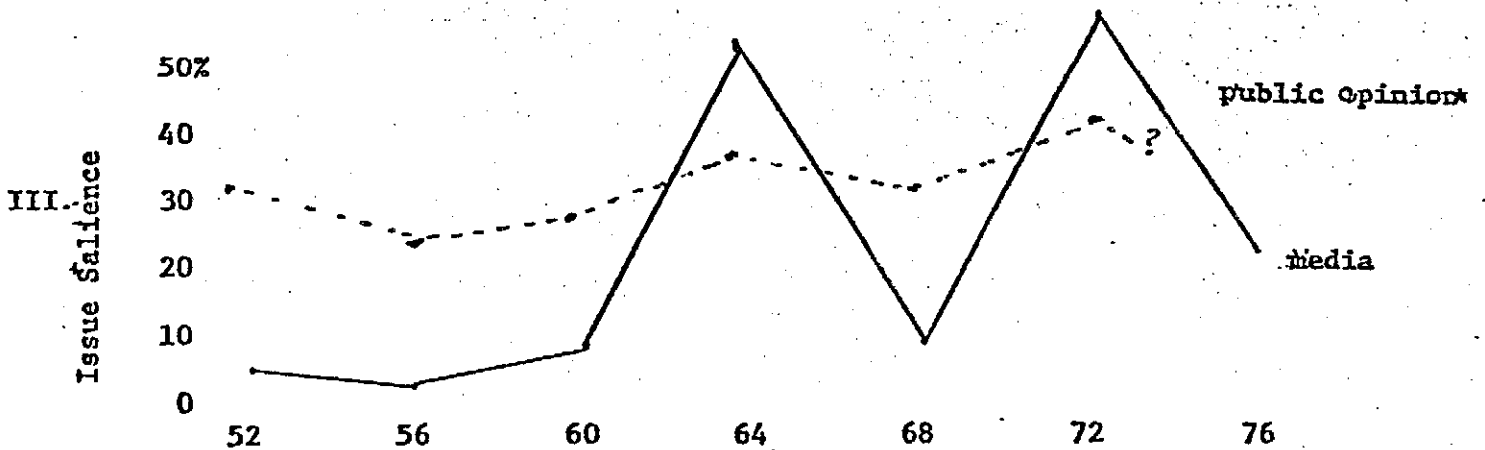
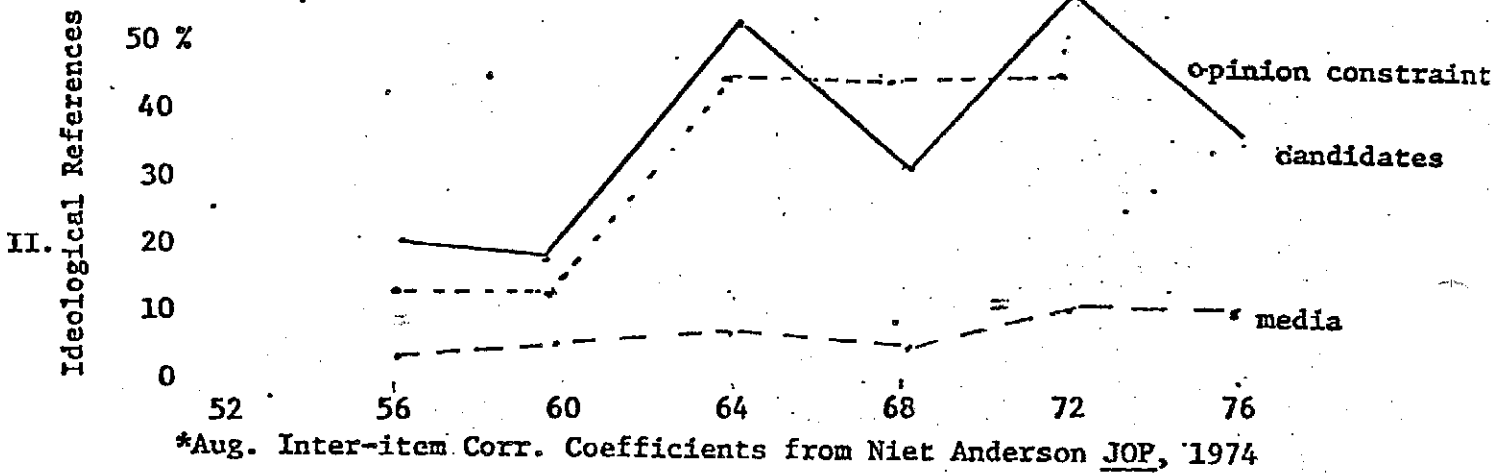
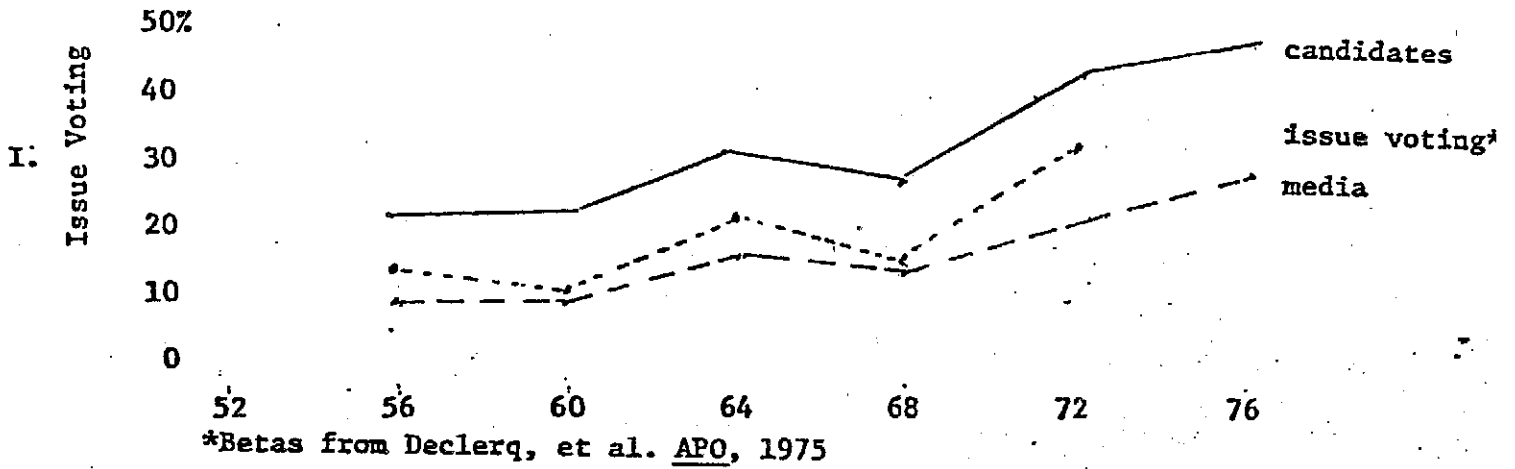
Content analyses
of broadcast and
print media coverage

CPS survey data

Measures would be developed and trends compared on each of the following variables:

- 1) The amount of campaign news coverage as a proportion of all news
- 2) References to political parties, party philosophies, performance and the linkage of candidates to parties
- 3) References to ideological concepts such as liberalism-conservatism and the linkage of specific issues and candidates to such concepts
- 4) References to domestic and foreign policy issues
- 5) References to candidate personalities and leadership abilities, etc.
- 6) References to group benefits

Which in turn might be compared as follows:



* CPS Mastercode data summarized by Kagay and Caldeira, APSA, 1975

Other data hypothetical.

The above figure is, of course, just speculative. But it does illustrate the potential ability of this approach to speak to some critically important hypotheses about the origins of trends in political behavior over the last 25 years. The first figure illustrates evidence which would support the growing sophistication hypothesis. All three elements in the model in this case would show increasing emphasis on issues and the ideological context of those issues. The data illustrated in the second figure would provide contrary evidence suggesting instead that the media play down policy questions and ideological issues focusing instead on candidate personalities and the horse-race aspect of the campaign. Data of this sort would suggest that any increases in public concern with issues emerged in spite of rather than because of the behavior of the media or the candidates. The bottom figure illustrates a third and rather intriguing possible pattern of the interaction of media, candidates and voters. This data would support an accentuation hypothesis which posits that the news media in following the campaigning day-to-day are especially sensitive to nuances and changes in candidates' strategies and accordingly in searching for fresh stories accentuate new elements in a particular campaign. If the campaign is not issue-oriented the media will search elsewhere for a theme. Accordingly, issue-voting might well be expected to fall off given consistent media attention to other matters.

These examples are drawn in general terms and refer to trends in broad categories of news content. The content analyses proposed here would lead quite naturally to an examination of patterns of attention to specific issues -- the so-called agenda setting function of the mass media. It may be found, for example, that although the media do devote

reasonable attention to policy issues during a campaign, attention is restricted to several selected major thematic issues with little or no attention to other issue positions taken by candidates.

Research Design and Methodology

Content analysis is not without its pitfalls. A two-part strategy would seem to increase the viability of such an undertaking. First, it is important to develop a highly refined and specific set of coding rules clearly tied to parallel trend measures of the CPS survey data. It would seem that an adaptation of the party and candidate master codes and the national problems codes would make an appropriate starting point. Content analysts too often attempt to measure everything at once, develop codes without specific hypotheses in mind or define categories so broadly as to be meaningless. Since the development of a broadly useful and balanced set of coding rules is central to the ultimate credibility of a project like this, it would seem important to consult with a number of the scholars working in this and related fields. The SSRC committee on Mass Communication and Political Behavior might be in a position to contribute to an interdisciplinary effort of this sort. Second, a highly selective sampling of media content and candidate speechmaking through these election periods would avoid the unmanageable and prohibitively expensive task of trying to collect and analyze all or even substantial portions of media content. Graber and others have found that except for variations total quantity of news, press coverage of election campaigns is remarkably similar from the smallest rural or suburban daily to the most prestigious of the

metropolitan papers. Hofstetter has documented even more striking similarities in the election coverage of the three television networks. Content analysis projects in the past have gotten bogged down in attempting to process exceedingly large quantities of text. Often this results in a decrease in quality or the need for computer coding. It strikes me that a small staff of well-trained coders would be most appropriate for the analysis of trends in the subtleties of campaign coverage and that the General Inquirer or other similar computer programs would be less appropriate. A particular model of content analyses known as Evaluative Assertion Analysis developed by Osgood and his colleagues some years ago might make a good starting point for this research.

There are a number of archives and research publications monitoring current events which could provide detailed information on candidates' public statements. The difficulty, of course, is selecting out a manageable and unbiased representative sample. Campaign news coverage, especially in the print media, is also well archived. The Vanderbilt Television News Archive would be a valuable resource for television news in the more recent campaigns. It would be helpful if political advertising could also be included in the analysis, here the Democratic and Republican Committees, as well as some academic archives such as the Hoover Institution's Collection, might prove to be helpful.

One very important side benefit of the quantitative analysis of candidate speechmaking and media coverage is that it will provide veridical data on the policy positions of candidates in the various campaigns which could in turn be used in the analysis of issue distance and issue voting.

Studies have established that Nixon and Humphrey were not very distinct in their public positions on Vietnam in 1968. It is time we expanded the scope of such analyses to a larger number of issues and campaigns.

Early researchers in the physical sciences posited the existence of mysterious ethers to make sense of otherwise inexplicable phenomenon. The mass media may come to play an ether-like role in modern theories of political behavior. Fortunately for political science, candidate behavior and media content need not remain in the realm of the ethereal.