Lecture 8

Press vs. Voters:

(i) Agenda-setting:

- Early Failure to Find Media Influence
- McComb & Agenda-setting Research: “The Media don’t tell you what to think, but the media tell you what to think about”

McComb based on the survey findings showed that the rank of issues that public thought was important almost exactly matched that of the most frequently presented issues in the media ➔ The more frequently the issue is presented in the media ➔ The more important the public perceives it. ➔ High correlation between the media agenda and public agenda.

- Question of Direction of Causality:

So, who sets whose agenda?

- Political Elites ➔ Media Agenda ➔ Public Agenda

(ii) Priming:

- General Theory: The agenda set forth by the media becomes the criteria for political decisions; what is most heavily covered in the media become the criteria by which the electorate evaluates the electoral candidates; consequently, the outcome of the election is determined by the candidate’s expected performance on the particular issue (e.g. “who would be better suited to handle the issue?”)
• Priming Experiment: Iyengar & Kinder

Subjects Watch TV News programs (every night for an entire week)

Treatment 1: “Arms Control” Grp. – News included 3 stories emphasizing the responsibility of the president on arms control
Treatment 2: “Unemployment” Grp. – News included 3 stories emphasizing the responsibility of the president on arms control
Control Grp. – No news stories about the president

“Do you approve of the way the President Bush is handling his job?”

• Underlying (Psychological) Explanation: Accessibility Heuristic

Voters being uninterested in politics → Their objective is to minimize the time and efforts spend in investigating issue positions of the candidates in a variety of issues. → They use the primed issues as a cue instead of doing a comprehensive analysis of different issues and where the candidates stand.

• Ex 1 )
Both Parties Praise Bush for Vow to Win War”
(Los Angeles Times, Jan 30, 1991)

“Bush has highest poll rating since Kennedy”
(Sunday Times, Jan 20, 1991)

Bush Approval Rating Slips to 47%
Poll Results Are Worst of His Presidency”
(Washington Post, Dec 17, 1991)

“It's the Economy, Stupid”

⇒ Bush Loses 1992 Election to Governor Clinton

How do you explain Bush’s downfall?
(iii) Framing: *Framing by Television News*

- “How citizens understand an issue—which features of it are central and which are peripheral—is reflected in how the issue is framed.” (Kinder in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 1998)

- Attribution: We constantly make judgments about who is responsible for the problems we watch in the news (“attribution”)

- Iyengar: Two basic frames in TV news stories
  
  (1) Episodic: Event-oriented case studies of public issues  
  (e.g., family living in poverty)

  (2) Thematic: public issues discussed in more general or abstract context  
  (e.g., release of new national statistics on poverty)

- How do frames affect attributions?

  Episodic Frames: Attribution to individual factors  
  Thematic Frames: Attribution to societal factors

(vi) A Revival Interests in Direct Persuasion: Zaller’s Model of Persuasion

- Persuasion = Pr (Acceptance | Reception):

Zaller conceptualizes “persuasion” as a function of two related concepts: “Reception” and “Acceptance”  
Much like in McGuire’s model of message learning theory

- Reception Axiom:

  Reception of Messages increases in a linear fashion as knowledge level goes up.

- Acceptance Axiom:

  Acceptance of Messages decreases in a linear fashion as knowledge level goes up.
Electoral Campaigns

Candidate vs. Candidate:

Framing the Race

- Politics - a fight between competing ideas.

- Which issues become prominent largely determines the outcome of the race.

- So, often the outcome of the race is defined in accordance with how the race is “defined” or what the important issues are → So, candidates attempt to construct an issue environment favorable to themselves

- We can talk about personal attributes as “issues” as well.

Personal Traits – 2 dimensions: 1) Integrity & 2) Competence

- Issue Ownership:

  A key concept here is “issue ownership” – John Petrocik has shown that there is a reputational superiority over a different set of issues in accordance with party affiliation of the candidate.

  Ex) Dem – New Deal issues such as social security and health care
      Rep – National Defense or foreign policy

  Ex) Other source of reputational differential – Gender, Race, etc.

  We can also talk about other lines by which such reputational differential may exist → Many of the demographic factors function as a cue here

  Ex) Female candidates
  Ex) Af. Am. Candidates

  Other sources of reputational superiority or issue ownership may be present as well based on some attributes peculiar to the candidate (e.g. their previous career may be important as well)
Candidates focus on discussing their own issues in order to prime such issues in order to define the race in accordance with their issues. The general framework would be the so-called “resonance model of campaigning”; when the candidate is able to resonate on the issues that are favorable to him or herself, the electability can be maximized.

Candidates’ behavior assumes - Voters who are not so into politics take these as cues and cast their votes accordingly. Therefore, instead of trying to match the opponent in every issue dimension, a key is to “define” the race in accordance with the issues that are favorable to you as a candidate.

Result: Talking Past each other.

General Proposition: Candidates hardly ever get engaged in a discussion on the same set of issues. Instead, each candidate speaking of his/her own issues - An in-dept discussion of issues become rare.

Political Advertising: Strategy, Effectiveness, & Effects

General Ad Strategies: Highlight the strengths of the candidate through promotional ads and point out the weakness of the opponent through attack ads.

- Classification of Political Ads:

Topical Classification – “Personality Ads” vs. “Issue Ads”

Tone - “Promotional Ads” vs. “Negative/Attack Ads” (vs. “Comparison/Contrast Ads”)

Some Patterns of Ad Strategies:

- You typically begin with a personality ads in the beginning - Name recognition is important

- Typically, the losing candidate - More likely to run attack ads
  a. Attack ads More Effective - 1. Expectancy Confirmation: politicians are bad therefore attack ads are more easily believed; 2. People in general remember negative information better
  → Attack advertising is more cost-effective
  b. Also, the fear of backfiring by winning candidates
  c. Also, by definition, the winning candidate has more independent, weak partisan supporters - Experimental findings show that these
people may be the easiest to knock out with attack advertising → They may not come out and cast their vote for the candidate but are at least likely to withdraw their support for the opponent → Vote share increases where actual vote decreases

- Similarly, challenging candidates → More likely to run attack ads

- Rep. Candidates → Slightly more likely to run attack ads → Also, slightly more effective for Rep. candidates

- When attacked → Must counterattack → Otherwise, it is equivalent to implicitly accepting the claims made against you.

Ex) Willy Horton Case:

The Demobilization Hypothesis

A hotly debated question is whether attack advertising reduces the turnout or increases it? Experimental findings tend to suggest they do; whereas survey findings tend to suggest not