Are Political Opinions Contagious? an Investigation on the Effects of Seating Position and Prior Attitudes on Moment-To-Moment Evaluations During the Presidential Debates

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During the recent Presidential election season, candidates Barack Obama and John McCain went head-to-head in three nationally televised debates. A rating panel of undecided voters provided moment-to-moment evaluations of each debate. This study investigates the effect of social influence on raters’ evaluations. Data analyzed from one debate show that the evaluations made by people attitudinally distant from each other to begin with tended to co-vary to a greater extent with each other when such individuals sat next to each other as opposed to separately, while those who were attitudinally close to each other to begin with were not affected by seating arrangement. More importantly, the greater covariance in evaluations among people who were attitudinally distant led to a greater polarization in attitudes post-debate.

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A Voter Among Voters: Political Decisions in the Social Context

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SESSION OVERVIEW

There has been a resurgence of interest recently in looking at politics and voting as a context in which to investigate broader issues in consumer decision making (e.g. Bechwati and Morrin 2007; Goldstein, Imai and Gollwitzer 2009, Hedgcock, Rao, and Chen 2009; Kim, Rao, and Lee 2009, Phillips, Urbany and Reynolds 2008, Zemborian and Johar 2007).

This session takes the point of view that political contexts are often an ideal environment in which to investigate the role of social influences on choice, judgment and evaluation, and the resulting consequences. For example, in an election, voters are largely responding to the same events as other voters as the campaign proceeds, and are simultaneously affected by pivotal events in a campaign, such as a debate or a high-profile negative advertisement. Furthermore, voters encounter information about how others are reacting to the campaigns and often spontaneously form inferences about the attitudes and intentions of other voters. The combination of information and inferences that voters have are then an important driver of the choices they make, and of the actions taken by campaigns.

In the first paper, Orhun and Urminsly study the inferences voters made about the electorate in the 2008 presidential election. They extend the intuition of false consensus to projection of evaluations underlying choice, providing evidence that it is this projection of candidate evaluations that underlies projection of candidate choice. They further demonstrate that voters project the way in which own evaluations led to choice, rather than evaluations themselves, onto both like-minded voters and supporters of the opposing candidate, contrary to the literature.

In the second paper, Ramanathan, McGill, Phillips, Schill and Kirk study the effect of social influences on undecided voters watching the general election debates. They find that evaluations made by people attitudinally distant from each other to begin with tend to co-vary to a greater extent with each other when such individuals sat next to each other as opposed to separately, while those who were attitudinally close to each other to begin with were not affected by seating arrangement. In particular, sitting next to someone with very different views led to greater polarization in post-debate attitudes.

In the third paper, Lovett and Shachar use a detailed secondary dataset on recent US congressional and presidential races to investigate the impact of voters’ knowledge on campaigns decision to “go negative” in their advertising. They present an econometric model in which ads inform voters on the good traits of the candidate or the bad traits of his opponent. They find that, consistent with the model, the proportion of negative ads increases with voters’ knowledge and candidate budget, helping to explain why negative ads are more prevalent in close races.

This special session is aimed at furthering current interest in the area and will help identify promising directions for future research. Akshay Rao, who has himself conducted influential research in this area, will serve as discussant, encouraging an audience discussion of the papers as well as a more general discussion of the role of social influences on political behavior and the implications of these findings for understanding social influences on consumer behavior.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Choosing Differently But in the Same Way: How Self Impacts Beliefs About Other Voters”

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Political decision-making fundamentally involves strategic behavior, such that decisions about who to vote for, how much resources to devote to a candidate and whether to vote involve beliefs about what others are likely to do. Traditional economic approaches assume that beliefs about others are not systematically biased. In contrast, psychological research has provided evidence for systematic biases, with own choices impacting inferences about others’ choices, such as false consensus (Ross, Greene and House 1977) and other projective biases (e.g. Monin and Norton 2003).

The literature on social projection has generally demonstrated that endorsement of an attitude leads to higher estimation of the degree of endorsement in a population, and that this effect will be moderated by perceived similarity to the reference population (e.g. Ames 2004). We argue that, beyond simple endorsement, the intensity of attitudes and preferences plays a key role in social projection onto beliefs about the attitudes and preferences of others, which has not been systematically investigated in the literature. Furthermore, the literature has largely concluded that there is little or no projection of own attitudes when making estimates for an out-group population (e.g. meta-analysis by Robbins and Krueger 2005). In contrast, we argue that while voters do not directly project their own evaluations onto out-groups (i.e. supporters of the opposing candidate) they do in fact utilize their own preferences in making these evaluations. Specifically, voters will recognize the difference in candidate preferences between themselves and the out-group, and will instead project the way their own views gave rise to their own choice in estimating the views in the out-group. This notion of conditional preference projection implies that the more strongly a voter supports their own candidate, the more they will infer that supporters of the opposing candidate strongly support their own candidate as well.

We present data from three studies conducted during the 2008 presidential election, as well as a reanalysis of historical data from the 2000 and 2004 elections. These include a national poll of voters making inferences about other national voters conducted shortly before the general election, a two-wave national poll conducted directly before and after the first presidential debate and an incentive-compatible lab study in which participants were compensated based on the accuracy of their inferences. Across the studies, we also addressed some methodological limitation in the literature, which generally involves estimating binary responses or typical responses on a continuous scale, which confounds inferences about summarizing the population as a whole with inferences about a single exemplar. In our studies participants estimated the entire distribution of responses for the reference population. Furthermore, our data enables us to account for the distinction between the effects of actual similarity and perceived similarity, to both in-group (like-minded voters) and out-group (supporters of the opposing candidate).

Across the studies, we replicate the false consensus effect for estimates of choices among all voters, and demonstrate that this
choice projection is driven by the projection of underlying candidate evaluations. Furthermore, for the in-group of voters supporting one’s own candidate, we find that projection of evaluations explains differences in beliefs across voters making the same choice. Inferences about the candidate ratings of other like-minded voters are systematically biased towards one’s own candidate evaluations. Thus, we demonstrate that the projection of attitudes extends beyond mere endorsement to intensity of attitudes and preferences.

For the out-group of voters supporting the opposing candidate, our studies demonstrate a novel effect of projecting the way one’s evaluations lead to choice onto others with opposing views. Our findings are consistent with our proposed framework of conditional preference projection, but are inconsistent with the processes proposed to account for social projection, particularly the anchoring hypothesis, which assumes that projection does not extend to the out-group. Specifically, we find that the higher voters rated their preferred candidate, the more they believed that supporters of the opposing candidate would rate that opposing candidate highly. Importantly, we find no effect on same-candidate evaluations: the degree of liking of own candidate (e.g. Obama among Obama-voters) did not affect the estimated liking of that candidate in the out-group (e.g. Obama among McCain-voters). This supports our argument that the inference that occurs is a higher-level projection of a rule of liking (e.g. they support their candidate in the same way I support mine), and helps rule out alternative explanations such as scale bias, motivated responding or simple assimilation-contrast effects.

These effects are found to be highly robust across populations and elicitation methods and are demonstrated both across individuals as well as within respondents who have changed their views over time. We will also discuss the impact of these findings on inferences for related actions (such as donating and volunteering) as well as the implications of our findings for strategic behavior in general.

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Political opinions evolve as a result of a variety of factors including information gathered from news sources and opinion leaders, and interactions with friends, family and neighbors. Casual remarks made by a friend or discussions with neighbors across the backyard fence may guide people’s attitudes towards a candidate. Individuals are thus embedded in a larger social network that may determine the degree of exchange of information (Eulau 1986, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987). However, most prior research has focused on tangible exchange of information in well-formed social networks. In this paper, we show that social influence may color political views despite no obvious or tangible communication among individuals brought together in an ad hoc social group of undecided voters. Specifically, we show that people who are more distant from each other in their attitudes towards candidates are more sensitive to social influences, but in a direction leading to greater polarization of attitudes. We contrast our findings to Ramanathan and McGill (2007), who showed that greater synchrony among strangers sharing an experience led to more positive evaluations of the experience.

The data for this study were the responses of 30 undecided voters on a CNN rating panel during the third Presidential debate in 2008. Respondents (12 Democrats, 11 Independents and 7 Republicans) provided their political identification, degree of liberal or conservative values and initial attitudes towards Obama and McCain, both as a summary judgment on a 100 point scale as well as in the form of evaluations on a 12-item scale (qualified, sophisticated, honest, believable, successful, attractive, friendly, sincere, calm, aggressive, strong, active). They then evaluated the candidates’ performance on the debate via a rating dial anchored on 0=Not at all positive and 100=Very positive. The debate lasted approximately 90 minutes and data were collected every second. Following the debate, respondents were again asked to provide their attitudes towards each candidate on both the summary scale and the 12-item scale. They were also asked to indicate whom they would be voting for. A seating map indicated the position of each respondent in the room.

After mean-centering the time-series data, we applied a band-pass filter to remove high frequency noise. Our interest was in a band of frequencies ranging from every minute to every 15 minutes. Given that each candidate spoke for at least one minute at any time, and the length of the longest segment in the debate was about 15 minutes, this band of frequencies seems reasonable. We wished to see if there was any influence of the two people to the immediate left and right of a focal respondent. A cross-spectral analysis of each pair of participants was used to determine the “coherence” in the two time series (see Ramanathan and McGill 2007). A high coherence at a given frequency indicates that one person’s evaluations predict the other’s evaluations very well at that frequency. For each triad, we computed a measure called multiple coherence, which represents the coherence between one person’s evaluations and an optimal linear combination of the evaluations of the persons to the left and right (Jenkins and Watts 1968). For each triad, we also computed the attitudinal distance among the respondents. This was done by treating the attitudes of the neighbors as forces of influence along two dimensions—support for Obama and support for McCain. The magnitude of the resultant vector is computed as the square root of the sum of the squares of the net pull toward Obama and the net pull towards McCain. For a statistical control, we constructed arbitrary triads of participants from the same data, using people not sitting next to each other, but sharing the same political leanings and opinions as the ones actually sitting next to each other. Thus, we created false triads with the same political characteristics as the true triads.

A regression on the multiple coherence for each triad was run with seating arrangement (true versus false neighbors), mean-centered attitudinal distance and the interaction term as predictors. Results showed a significant main effect of seating arrangement with a greater coherence among true versus false neighbors. This was qualified by a significant interaction between seating and attitudinal distance. Attitudinally distant participants had a greater coherence when they sat next to each other compared to the false neighbor condition; people who were attitudinally close to each other did not experience any greater coherence due to seating. Importantly, the greater coherence among attitudinally distant people sitting close to each other was not due to agreement but rather more predictable disagreement—the evaluations of these participants were always out of phase by between 90-180 degrees in the spectral analysis, suggesting lack of synchrony.

Further, we found that the increased coherence in evaluations led to more sharply polarized attitudes post-debate. This effect was particularly pronounced among McCain supporters, suggesting that social signals emitted by Obama supporters during the debate may have been particularly impactful on McCain supporters, leading them to polarize in their attitudes. The effect of initial attitudinal
distance on final distance was mediated by coherence, but only for those seated next to each other.

Our findings suggest that political opinions can indeed leak via subtle social influence and cause people to alter their own opinions. We are presently analyzing the data from the second debate and will be able to present findings from both debates at the conference.

“The Seeds of Negativity: Knowledge and Money”  
Mitchell J. Lovett, University of Rochester, USA  
Ron Shachar, Duke University, USA

In commercial environments firms can improve their standing (profits, stock value, etc.) either by becoming more attractive to their audience (i.e., positive appeals) or by making their competitors less appealing (i.e., negative appeals). While some combative acts, such as sabotaging competitors’ products, are forbidden by law, comparative (which implicitly includes negative appeals) advertising is not only allowed, but even encouraged by the Federal Trade Commission. Furthermore, the portion of comparative advertisements out of all advertisements has been approximated as close to one out of three (Niemann 1987), representing a substantial advertising volume. Further, recent media claims even suggest that negative advertising in commercial settings is on the rise (York 2008).

This study presents a model of negative advertising and examines it empirically. In order to learn the most about negative advertising, we focus on an application in which negativity is frequent and exhibits high variation—political campaigns. In their own right, political campaigns represent an important advertising market with over $2.5 billion in ad spending in 2008 (Atkinson, Dec. 2008) and, of course, important consequences. Further, political campaigns present an understudied, interesting empirical regularity about negativity—that is, the greater tendency to go negative in competitive elections. For example, in the 2000 Senate elections the portion of all ads that were negative was 33% in noncompetitive races but 65% in competitive races (Goldstein and Freedman 2002a). This empirical regularity is important both because it is a central feature of the application studied here (i.e., political campaigns) and because, more generally, it is an intriguing relationship between competition and advertising tone. Thus, we believe that a model that can explain this regularity is likely to be insightful about the strategic forces behind negative advertising. Thus, we model candidates’ decisions to go negative in political advertising and aim to explain this regularity.

We present a model of electoral competition with two candidates—a Republican and a Democrat. Each candidate has good traits (e.g., effective manager) and bad traits (e.g., performs badly under pressure). Of course, voters’ utility increases in the candidate’s good traits and decreases in the bad traits, but not all of the traits are known to the public. Each candidate faces a limited budget and tries to maximize total votes by allocating his budget between ads that present his good traits (i.e., positive advertising) and ads that present his opponent’s bad traits (i.e., negative advertising). Voters combine this information from ads with other sources of information to form impressions of candidates. As a point of departure from existing studies, we incorporate recent psychological evidence that supports nonlinear asymmetric responses of overall attitudes to positive and negative beliefs (Holbrook et al. 2001). We find that in equilibrium the proportion of negative ads increases with voters’ knowledge and the candidate’s budget. Interestingly, close races are not only characterized by high negativity, but also by (a) high media coverage (West 1994) which can lead to high knowledge and (b) large marketing spending (i.e., large budgets) by the candidates (Goldstein and Freedman 2002a). In this sense, our model can tie together these three empirical regularities.

In order to examine the model and its implications, we collect data on the elections for the US House of Representative in 2000, 2002 and 2004 and for US president in 2000 and 2004. Our key theoretical variables of interest are the portion of all ads that are negative, the total budget of ads, the closeness of the race, and voter knowledge. There are various challenges in the data collection. The most dramatic of which is getting information on voters’ knowledge, particularly measures that distinguish the positive and negative aspects of knowledge about a particular candidate. Furthermore, this task is especially difficult for the congressional elections, where very little candidate specific information is available through surveys. Still, the evidence is supportive for our theory. Our results suggest that our theoretical variables contribute significantly to the explanation of candidate negativity. As expected by our model, as budget increases negativity increases and as both positive knowledge about a candidate increases and the negative about the opponent increases, the candidate goes more negative. Further, once accounting for knowledge and budget, the effect of closeness is significantly attenuated. Thus, the data is quite supportive for the effects of knowledge and budget on negativity and the theory helps to explain why close political races are more negative.

We finish with a discussion of the implications of this study. We discuss future directions for research in political advertising including extending this research to a dynamic context. Finally, we discuss the potential for transfer of the ideas to commercial settings.

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