

Measurement of Public Attitudes and Stability of Political Opinion

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Teaching Agenda

- 1 Forming Preferences
- 2 Fundamental Role of Citizens in Studying Political Opinion
- 3 Theory of “Instability” of Attitudes: The ‘Top of the Head’ Model
- 4 Compounding the Problem: Measurement Error

Preference Formation Opening Question



Motivating Question

Where do you think political preferences held by citizens come from?
What do you think some of the “motivating” internal dynamics are with respect to the development of political preferences?

Preference Formation in Political Science

What are “preferences?”

“Theories of human cognition are ultimately theories of physical, biological systems. Our ability to describe human cognition in one way rather than another rests ultimately on the physical and biological nature of human beings. Furthermore, the fact that human beings are grounded in the world implies additional constraints that must be taken into account in constructing our theories.” Newell (1990:42)

- ▶ What are political preferences?
- ▶ Preferences as a comparative evaluation of a set of objectives that can be ranked
- ▶ Can be cognitive and reflective of prior experiences with stimuli—what does this mean?

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The Origins of Comparative Evaluations

- ▶ *Political attitudes*: preferences are rankings derived from comparative evaluations that psychologists call attitudes
- ▶ *O'Keefe (1990:18)* defines political attitudes as a “person’s general evaluation of an object, where “object” is understood in a broad sense as encompassing persons, events, products, policies, institutions, and so on.”
- ▶ What does this mean?
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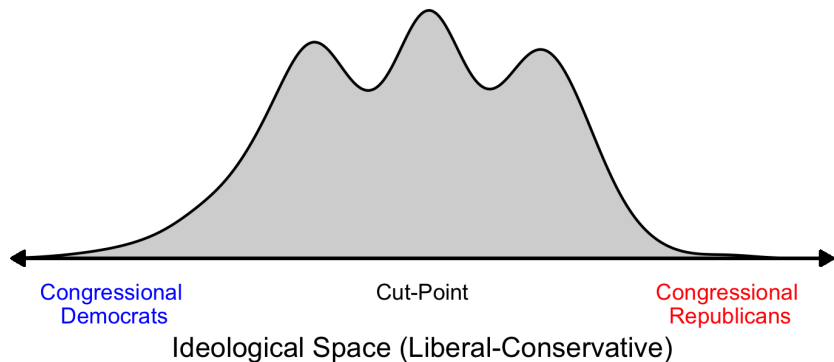
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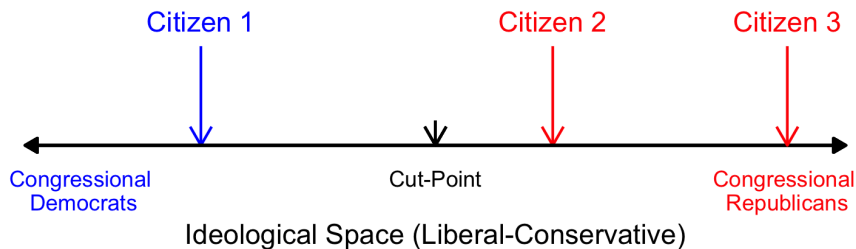
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Example: Effect of Ideology on Congressional Approval Ratings



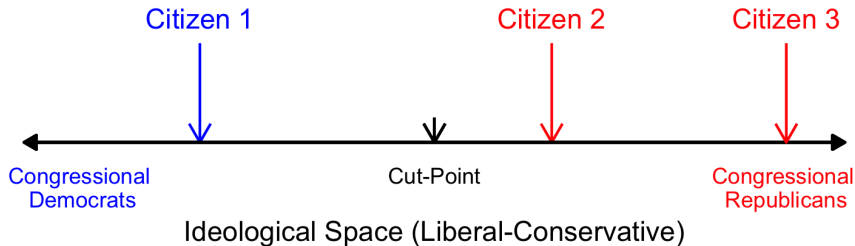
Proximity during Democratic Congresses



Ideological Component of Approval

- ▶ H_1 : \uparrow Proximity \times Democratic Congress = \uparrow Probability of Congressional Approval

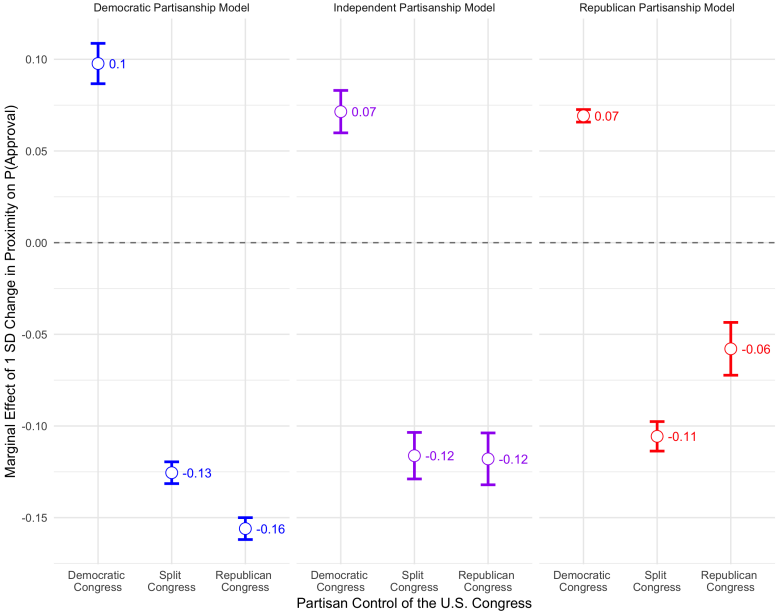
Proximity during Republican Congresses



Ideological Component of Approval

- ▶ H_2 : \uparrow Proximity \times Republican Congress = \downarrow Probability of Congressional Approval

Conflicting Preferences: Ideology & Congressional Approval



Preference Formation: Internal Processes

- ▶ *Memory-based models: Preferences* are derived from “memory”, with citizens canvassing their memories for information on object attributes and use what they find to form preferences.
- ▶ What would be an example of this?

Iraq War & Majority Rule

Individual Preference Are you for or against withdrawing troops this year from Iraq?

Explicit trade-offs: Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

- For democracy to work best, the will of the majority must be followed.
- For democracy to work best, the rights of the minority must be protected.

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- ▶ Some of these models rely on summated evaluations on political objects from memory. Example: *candidate choice & “likes-dislikes”*

2018 CA-06 Congressional Election

Candidate Likes-Dislikes: Is there anything in particular about Doris Matsui that might make you want to vote for her?

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Motivating Question

Key Motivating Question

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- ▶ What is the fundamental difference between the “on-line” and “memory-based” models of preference formations? What are the implications of these models for the “stability” of preference formation?

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Preference Formation: External Processes

- ▶ Fundamentally speaking of external network & top-down effects of messaging on preference formation
- ▶ What can be an example of this?
- ▶ *Persuasion Studies & Resistance to Information: Consensus*
 - Receiving & Accept Message
 - Most aware citizens are those likely to receive information
 - Most well-informed citizens are least likely to update their beliefs in the face of new information
- ▶ *Messaging effects*
- ▶ *Source cues*

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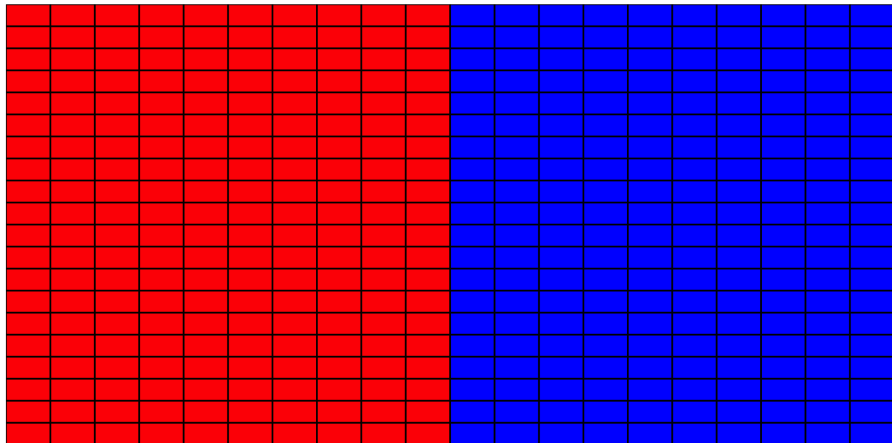
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Bringing it Together: Zaller's "Top of the Head" Model

Hypothetical Top of the Head

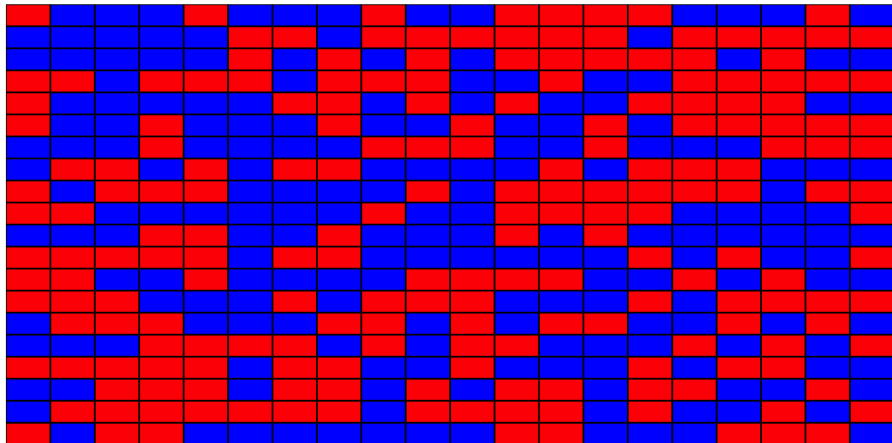


 Conservative  Liberal

Each Square Represents a Liberal or Conservative consideration

Draw of Equal Considerations

Hypothetical Top of the Head

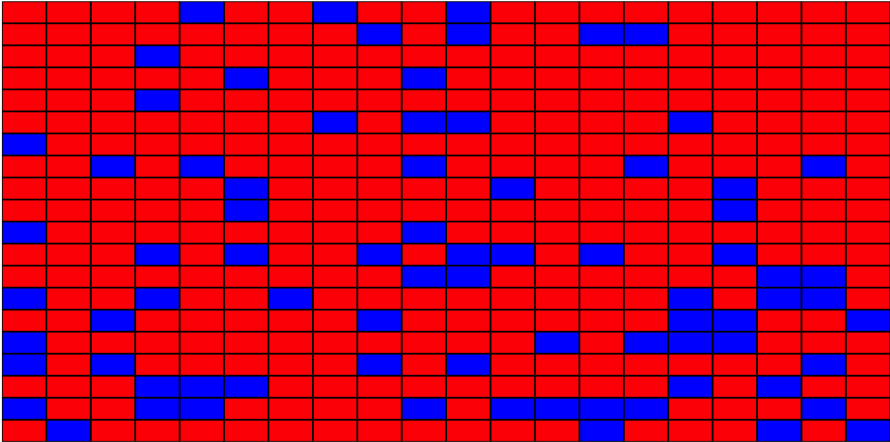


■ Conservative ■ Liberal

Each Square Represents a Liberal or Conservative consideration

Bias Draw of Considerations

Hypothetical Top of the Head



■ Liberal ■ Conservative

Each Square Represents a Liberal or Conservative consideration. Liberal N = 25%, Conservative N = 75%

Zaller's "Top of the Head" Model Explained

- ▶ Voters are bombarded with political *considerations* in everyday life
- ▶ *Consideration* is anything such as a belief, attitude, or fact that might support an opinion
- ▶ Where L = liberal considerations & C = conservative considerations
- ▶ Can you think of a *consideration* & predict how both citizens would respond to an opinion question based on the subject of your consideration?

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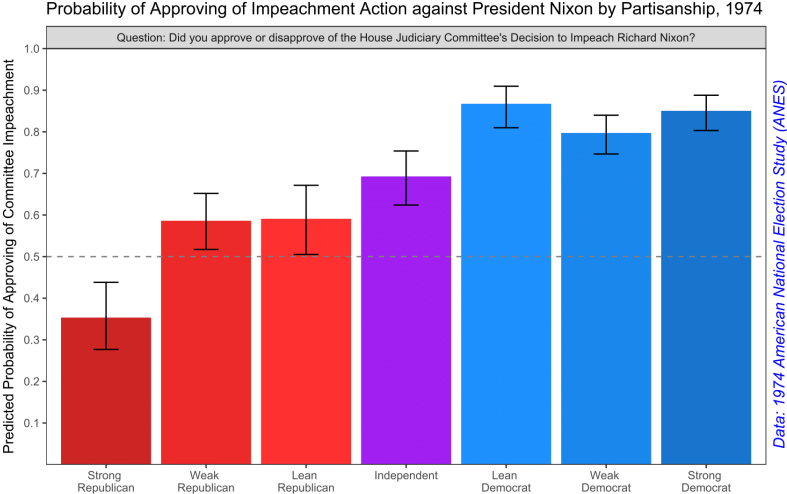
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Axioms of Zaller's Model

- 1 **Ambivalence:** Citizens are generally susceptible to conflicting considerations
 - 1 **Reception:** Citizens with *higher levels* of political interest & awareness are more likely to receive political information
 - 2 **Resistance:** Citizens *resist* political information that are contrary to their predispositions (especially partisan & ideological preferences)
- 2 **Accessibility:** Considerations that are more recent to a citizen are more accessible when responding to surveys or forming attitudes
- 3 **Response:** Probability of a liberal or conservative survey response (or preference) given considerations present at the “top of the head”. For example: Citizen in the bias sample has a 25% probability a liberal response.

Evidence of the *Resistance Axiom*: Nixon Impeachment



Probabilities estimated from bivariate logistic regression model. Confidence intervals estimated with Huber-White Robust standard errors.

Importance of Survey Mode in Measurement

- ▶ *Two Fundamental Concerns of Survey Researchers*

- ① Non-Response

- ② Reporting “Error”

- ▶ *Differing Survey Modes*

- ① Self-reporting surveys (Ex: Cooperative Congressional Election Study)

- ② Interviewer administered surveys (Ex: traditional American National Election Survey)

- ▶ Which survey mode do you think produces more “sincere” and stable opinions?
- ▶ Self-administration “reduces fears or embarrassment” but may reduce concentration by the survey respondent
- ▶ Implications of survey mode differentials on top-of-the-head model?

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Key Points

- 1 Conceptualizing *preferences* critical to the understanding of American Political Behavior
- 2 Preferences fundamentally are comparative evaluations subject to rank-ordering
 - ▶ Preferences can be multidimensional, such as evaluating candidates on valence & policy dimensions
- 3 Clear distinction in models of preference formation, with implication of Zaller's model indicating lack of sincere preferences in the mass public
- 4 Citizens resist new information that don't confirm their prior beliefs
- 5 Survey researchers must also contend with *survey mode* in measurement of political attitudes