Political Science 146 – Public Opinion and Mass Media: Attitude Stability and Non-Attitudes

Loren Collingwood, Political Science

October 9, 2017
Political Attitudes and Democracy

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- Stable attitudes more likely towards objects that tend to influence everyday lives (jobs, schools) or toward salient groups (race)
- Instability emerges when issues are more remote
What is a panel study?

- A group of respondents interviewed at time 1, then interviewed again at time 2.
- The same questions are asked of the same people in both surveys.
- Example: Interview everyone in this room the first day of class. Ask questions about immigration reform, legalization of marijuana, drone strikes. Then interview everyone during finals week and ask the same questions.
- If individual responses are the same → attitude stability.
- If overall aggregation of responses is the same → collective attitude stability.
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### Attitude Instability

**Table:** Source: Converse: “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” 1964. 1956-58-60 panel data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Pct. Same Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party identification</strong></td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School desegregation</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment discrimination</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guaranteed employment</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolationism</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal aid to education</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign economic aid</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign military aid</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal housing</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>40.7</td>
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Reasons for Political Attitude Change

- Real-world events lead to changes (e.g., Gulf of Tonkin)

- Media effects and agenda setting (e.g., Iraq War)

- Non-Attitudes – this is what the critics originally worried about; and what Converse argued

  "Large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time." Converse, 1970

- Converse demonstrated that most people’s opinions are not well grounded in broader beliefs (such as liberalism and conservatism) and are not well organized

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Some questions citizens simply have no genuine attitude on, but will give survey response

Partially explained by social-desirability effect: People do not want to look stupid in front of someone else, when we know our role as citizens is supposedly to pay attention to news and have opinions on things our vote may influence.
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Table: “Some people say that the 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>66</td>
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Table: “[President Clinton/The Republicans in Congress] said that the 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clinton Version</th>
<th>Republican Version</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party ID</strong></td>
<td><strong>Percent</strong></td>
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</tr>
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(Deli-Carpini and Keeter 1991)

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- Random fluctuation around “true opinion”
Opinion toward Gov't Spending
(1971−1989)

Time (Year)
Percentage
Spending too little on welfare
Spending too little on education
Spending too little on fighting crime
Presidential Approval: Attitude based on actual (usually) events

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- Bad: War casualties
- Bad: Financial costs of war
- State of the economy
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Obama Approval, Jan 2009 – Current (Gallup)

Date
Approval Rating
Approve
Disapprove

General Election
Osama bin Laden killed
Honeymoon Period

Approve
Disapprove

Osama bin Laden killed
General Election