

Quandaries of Mixed Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: Using Mixed Archival and Statistical Methods to Decipher Presidential Responsiveness to Public Opinion

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Benefits of Archival Work

- A policy and political process “frozen in time” allows us to see what the “president knew and when he knew it.”
- Free from faulty memories, deliberate distortions or incomplete information
- Allows us to understand motivations of the players in the game (Page 1993)
- Allows researchers to get beyond “policy space” (or one-dimensional) measures



Problems with Archival Work

- Difficult to treat data in a systematic manner
- Selection bias: not every phone conversation or informal hallway discussion was recorded
- Historical interpretation problems
- Lost or discarded information by original author or by archivists
- Most papers only partially open (Ford at 71% , Reagan at 14% of first term, Nixon at “unknown”)
- Restrictions, restrictions, restrictions! (deed of gifts; “P-5” classifications)



Bush’s EO on Presidential Papers

- Presidential Records Act of 1978 made presidential papers property of *government* not the *individual*
- Papers become open 12 years after president has left office
- Current president retains a gate keeping function over release of past presidential papers (in conjunction with former president *and* archivists)
- Requires public seeking particular documents to show “demonstrated, specific need” before they would be considered for release
- EO initially blocked 68,000 pages of Reagan documents scheduled for release



Searching for Success

- Papers are arranged by *folder* not by *document*
- Necessitates searching for documents in specific papers of individuals and subjects
- Also requires a fairly narrow historical or analytical focus
- Documents *not* cross referenced before Kennedy
- Some collections (Truman, Carter) are chaotically organized
- Your search strategy is only as good as the archivists and the finding aide



Scholarly Approaches to Studying Responsiveness

- Case studies to describe institutionalization of public opinion polling in White House (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995; 1999; 2000)
- Counting polls to glean patterns of behavior (Heith 2003)
- Impute motives in decision making to particular actors (Towle 2003)
- Describe “proper” use of public opinion polling in decision making (Heith 2002)



Problems Specific to Studying Presidential Responsiveness

- Difficult to accurately “count” polls to glean patterns of behavior because of document availability problems
- Single case studies (of individual administrations or policy issues) lack ability to make generalizable conclusions
- Historical work is difficult to interpret definitively (revisionism comes weeks, not years, after original studies)



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Questions to Ask

- Are archival data being used to *illustrate* the case or *make* the case?
- How much archival data is *enough* to qualify as sufficient “proof”?
- Is the theory appropriate to utilize archival data as evidence?



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Recommended Practices on Mixing Your Methods

Evidence from the Field



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Use Archival Evidence to Illustrate Definitions

- In my work, I define a president’s statement as *congruent* with majority opinion (51% or greater) when, after a presidential statement is recorded, public opinion polling in the time span one year (or less) before the statement was made shows this opinion is in harmony with the president’s statement.

Example: “The public would support the President vetoing a tax package to stimulate the economy because it increased the deficit and broke the 1990 budget agreement. The public, including the President’s core supporters, would oppose his vetoing a tax package to stimulate the economy because it increased taxes on high income families.”
(Bush White House, Sid Rogich, February 22, 1992)



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Use Archival Evidence to Demonstrate a Hypothesized Finding

- Hypotheses suggested presidents would make more responsive statements when their popularity was higher

Example: “A presidential talk will explain this policy and its meaning to the widest possible audience. It will do so with maximum impact and authority. It will have an effect in proportion to the people’s liking and respect for the President.”
(Eisenhower White House, Leo Burnett, March 29, 1956)



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Use Archival Evidence to Explain an Unexpected Finding

- Inflation was hypothesized to decrease responsiveness to opinion, but multivariate logit models suggest it has a positive relationship

Example: “Support for extreme policy solutions is increasing. On the question of having complete controls on prices, in one year the results have gone from 38% favor: 52% oppose to 59% favor: 33% oppose. On the question of complete controls on wage and salary increases, we find for the first time ever a plurality in favor (48% to 41%), a remarkable turn about in the last three months (September 39% favor, 50% oppose) and the last year (January 1978 31% favor, 60% oppose).”
(Carter White House, Patrick Caddell, January 16, 1979)



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Use Archival Data to Challenge Asserted Theoretical Notions

- Theories espoused by Jacobs and Shapiro (2000; 2001) argue that policy makers poll-test language to “sell” policies to the public (policies the public may not want)

Example: “It is becoming apparent to me that while the idea of the President’s 28 billion dollar tax and budget cut is popular and will help him politically, it will not win the election. The major reason for this is, it is like several of the President’s recent programs don’t do anything for anybody even though there is majority agreement with them. I think the President needs to have a series of proposals and programs that do something for individual citizens to help them make their lives better.”

(Ford White House, Bob Teeter, December 5, 1975)



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Use Archival Data to Substantiate Secondary Findings

- Scholars of foreign policy argue that public opinion poses a formidable boundary on decision making

Example: “All this indicates that the public has supported our policies – including increased military efforts – to date. This is primarily because they want us to be in a position to negotiate from strength. They want – and even anticipate – a negotiated, compromise peace. They have supported escalation because they hope it will bring peace more quickly.”

(Johnson White House, Bill Moyers, December 27, 1965)



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Lessons Learned

- More data and description is always better
- Document, document, document
- Keep the archival evidence “on point”
- Archival evidence alone is *rarely* enough...
- ...but a mixed method approach has strong explanatory empirical power



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