ELECTION CAMPAIGNS, SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PERCEIVED DISCUSSANT PREFERENCE

Robert Huckfeldt, Jeffrey Levine, William Morgan, and John Sprague

This paper examines the communication of political preferences between citizens during the course of an election campaign. We are particularly concerned with the ability of individuals to make judgments regarding the likely votes of others within their networks of relationships. To this end, we employ the concept of accessibility and its measurement device—response latency or response time—in the context of a computer-assisted telephone interview. We argue that the accessibility of respondent perceptions regarding the voting preferences of their associates depends on a range of individual and contextual factors, and the analysis focuses on variation across individuals, across relationships, and across the temporal contexts of election campaigns.

The communication of political preferences among and between citizens is an important part of democratic politics, but some political messages are communicated more effectively than others, and some messengers are more effective communicators. Identifying the various factors that enhance and impede the effective communication of political preferences is both a significant analytic challenge and a central task in more fully understanding the process of democratic deliberation (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). Communications research shows that clearly and forcefully conveyed messages serve to link the message and the messenger in the perception of the receiver (Huckfeldt et al., forthcoming). Thus, one consequence of effective communication is an enhanced ability to perceive the political preferences of other citizens.

In this paper we are primarily concerned with election campaigns, social
communication, and the strength and accessibility of the perceptions that citizens hold regarding their associates' political preferences. Understanding the strength and accessibility of perceptions and opinions is one element of a larger analytic challenge in political behavior and public opinion research (Krosnick and Petty, 1995; Fazio, 1995). Some opinions matter more than others, and determining which opinions are important to which individuals under which circumstances are central problems in political analysis. In this context we address general issues of theory and methodology in analyzing the accessibility of the perceptions, opinions, and attitudes held by individual citizens. Recent work in social and cognitive psychology has focused on the cognitive structure of attitudes and opinions (Lodge and Taber, forthcoming), where the accessibility of an attitude is defined with respect to the associative strength in memory between an attitude and an attitude object (Fazio, 1990a, 1995). Hence, accessible perceptions, opinions, and attitudes are closely connected to associated objects in memory, and various factors might be responsible for creating this accessibility: the frequency of discussion related to the perception or opinion, the lack of ambivalence with respect to a perception or opinion, and so on.

Just as important, accessibility reveals itself in terms of response latency—the time required for an individual to respond when presented with a stimulus. For example, people who possess accessible perceptions regarding the political preferences of a particular coworker should respond more rapidly when asked for their evaluation of that coworker's likely vote. An individual who responds instantaneously demonstrates an opinion that is more accessible than the opinion of an individual who responds only after extended consideration. Hence, an accessible perception may have fundamentally different consequences than an inaccessible perception, even if both perceptions identify the coworker as a likely Republican voter.

While pioneering work on accessibility and latency has occurred in experimental laboratory settings (Fazio et al., 1982), more recent efforts have incorporated these conceptual and methodological tools within computer-assisted telephone interviews (Bassili, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Sniderman and Carmines, 1997). In this paper we continue in the tradition of these CATI studies by employing accessibility and response latency as tools for assessing social communication among citizens over the course of an election campaign. As part of a 1996 election study, 2,174 main respondents were interviewed between early March 1996 and early January 1997, and response time measures were included for various questions in the study. Our goal is to assess the utility of these response time measures for studying political communication among citizens, and our more general goal is to assess their utility for the analysis of electoral politics.

Two empirical strategies are employed in this context. First, we compare response latencies across individuals, across relationships, and across the tem-