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usdream2010@gmail.com

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HOW CAMPAIGNS CHANGE VOTERS' POLICY POSITIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF SHIFTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE REDISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

by

JUNYAN ZHU

Under the Direction of Sean Richey

ABSTRACT

During campaigns, voters often learn that their party's candidate advocates policy positions that conflict with their own attitudes. These cross-pressured voters can either adjust their policy positions to be consonant with their party's candidate or voting for others. I use monthly NES Panel Data from 2008-2009 to examine how voters' beliefs change about a specific policy: the redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation during a presidential campaign. I test this by creating a Random Effects Ordered Probit Panel regression model of ten monthly waves of survey data before the 2008 presidential election. The study shows that over the campaign, voters' policy positions evolve on redistributive taxation policy; voters adjust their prior policy cognitive dissonance to be in agreement with their candidate. The results indicate that in the 2008 Presidential election, the electorate more often moved their policy beliefs to be in agreement with their candidate, rather than switch votes.

INDEX WORDS: Presidential campaigns, Voting behavior, Policy beliefs, Taxation

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JUNYAN ZHU

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2012

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by

JUNYAN ZHU

Committee Chair: Sean Richey

Committee: Jason Reifler

Sarah Gershon

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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Introduction

During campaigns, voters often find their party's candidate advocates policy positions that conflict with their own attitudes. These cross-pressured voters can either adjust their policy positions to be consonant with their party's candidate or switch votes to the other candidate. It is important to understand how cross-pressured voters decide. In the traditional view, voting is thought of as a funnel of causality (Campbell et al 1960). Voters' policy positions are thought to be causally prior to vote choice, and policy positions are thought to be largely pre-decided by the demographics and material interest (see Jackson 1975). This theory has guided political science for five decades and is generally the way most political analysts conceive of how vote choice occurs: policy beliefs lead to a particular ideology, ideology leads to a choice on party identification and finally, party identification leads to a vote choice.

It may be, however, that voters learn their candidates' policy preferences during the campaign, and adjust their policy preferences to match their candidate. Lenz (2009) finds that campaigns and mass media facilitate a process of learning, especially for people not well-informed: voters are responsive to campaign messages. Issues that are discussed more thoroughly in the campaign are perceived more precisely by the electorate (Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau 1995). And we know that voters pay increasing attention to politics during presidential campaigns. Campaign mobilization provide easy to obtain cues on how to think about political issues that cross-pressured voters can pick up on (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). If people like either Obama or McCain, they may listen to his speeches, watch the presidential debates and political ads. Voters learn their preferred candidate's positions differ from their own, for example, on tax policies. Thus, they make adjustment to reduce cognitive dissonance or simply be persuaded by the candidate's argument. That's how one's policy beliefs change to agree with the supported candidate's opinion.

To test this possibility, I use monthly NES Panel Data from 2008-2009 to examine how voters' policy beliefs change about the redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation during 2008 presidential campaign. I test this by creating a Random Effects Ordered Probit Panel regression model of ten monthly waves of survey data before the 2008 presidential election. I show that over the campaign, voters' policy positions evolve on redistributive taxation policy. My findings show voters adjust their prior policy dissonance to be in agreement with their candidate. The results indicate that in the 2008 Presidential election, cross-pressured voters more often move their tax policy beliefs to be in agreement with their candidate, rather than switch votes.

1. Rethinking the Funnel of Causality

Conventional wisdom believes that the issue orientations of an electorate derive from core values (Alvarez and Brehm 2002). Most Americans have stable underlying attitudes (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979, 1983; Feldman 1990; Kinder and Sears 1985; Page and Shapiro 1992). General beliefs, for example, on equal opportunity, self-reliance, and limited government, enable principled reasoning on policy (Goren 2004). This issue orientation theory posits policy preferences are predominant in deciding electoral choice (Page and Jones 1979). People have policy stands first, then look for an endorsing political party and candidate (Campbell et al 1980). This funnel theory of voting has been widely accepted by scholarship for decades.

Page and Jones (1979) maintain policy stands lead to a choice on party affiliation. And party identification is a useful cue in electoral decision-making (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Partisans without encyclopedic policy information, would by default assume their party sympathize with their policy stands and represent their benefits (Page and Brody 1972). Party shortcuts even outweigh policy reasoning and core political values in the cognitive process (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001; Cohen 2003, 2005). People are still largely affected by party cues, despite a handsome amount of information at hand (Bullock 2011).

Partisanship, once formed, is stable and largely defines a wide range of policy stands (Bartels 2002). People usually socialize with like-minded cohorts, adopt information similar to their existing opinion, and ignore conflicting messages (Huckfeldt et al 2004; Mutz 2006). Also, people are prone to interpret new messages in the way that is congruent with their established views (Taber and Lodge 2006). Presented with negative messages about their supported candidate, voters might instead strengthen their support for the candidate (Redlawsk 2002). This backlash effect from partisan bias therefore reinforces the divergence of existing ideological differences (Bartels 2000; Nyhan and Reifler 2010).

The debate is basically a question over the causal relationship between voters' policy attitude change and their electoral choice. The voting mechanism can be a simultaneous interaction between party evaluation, political ideology and policy assessment, rather than a one-way funnel (Brody and Page 1973; Jackson 1975; Markus and Converse 1979). Finkel (1995) proposes two paths for opinion change: “Learning effects” echoes the views of *The American Voter* that voters' issue attitudes lead to their vote choices; “Learning induced, issue opinion change” is where voters listen their candidate's opinion, and eventually take it their own. In other words, people sync their issues stands to that of the candidate they voted or intend to vote for. Therefore, vote choice alters voter's policy stands; the flow of the funnel of causality is reversed.

As we know, knowledge is a prerequisite for voters to translate their values into specific policy choices (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). However, there is barely any “enlightened preferences” in the beginning of the campaign (Gelman and King 1993). How do the widely politically ignorant public shape their attitudes on political issues? *Campaigns* provide abundant political information. A large number of undecided voters are learning through campaign process. News media helps voters gradually shape clear issue position and candidate endorsement, by highlighting the perceived difference between candidates (Alvarez 1998; Bartels 1993; Franklin 1991; Popkin 1991, 2001). As Gelman

and King (1993) put it, “the media make the campaign relatively fair by giving both candidates a reasonable opportunity to express their views, thus continuing to help inform the voters.” If voters think certain candidate trustworthy, knowledgeable and intend vote for him, it is highly likely those voters will align their policy attitudes with that of the candidate. Therefore, it is possible that voters' policy positions may gradually change when they are aware of where the candidate stands.

2. Attitudes Towards the Redistribution of Wealth

I choose to study tax policy because compared with moral issues, economic issues remain the center in American politics, as its role in voting decision (Ansolabehere et al 2006). In 2008 presidential election, particularly, economic recovery is the general primary concern. Taxation and redistribution are among the chief factors that determine how well American democracy works.

Following Hobbesian and Lockesian liberalism, Americans distrust government, value self-reliance and individual initiative. However, there are wide inattention and uncertainty about the tax policies. The public failed to connect unfair taxation with the deteriorating social equality. People would rather believe that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, regardless of what the actual economic trends are. Yet, affluent people are more likely to be knowledgeable, contact public officials and turnout to vote than the poor to get their voice heard (see Bartels 2008). Positions on tax policy are largely determined by ideological values: liberals are more concerned than conservatives about increasing inequality, while conservatives blame inequality to lack of “hard work”.

Bartels (2005) attributes the wide support of George W. Bush tax cuts to the simple ignorance of mass public and their lack of information. Bartels (2005, 2008) shows that the public mistakenly voted for the taxation that against their interests, which casting doubts on how democracy functions if voters can't vote correctly for their own benefit.

“While public opinion was generally supportive of the Bush tax cuts, there is also plenty of evidence of ignorance and uncertainty about the workings of the tax system and the policy options under

consideration-or actually adopted-in Washington. Much of the public was unclear about basic facts in the realm of tax policy; some of what the public did know was patently false; and a remarkable number of people, when offered the chance, said that they had not thought about a policy innovation whose consequences are reckoned by experts in trillions of dollars. *p.177*"

We know that if better informed, individuals are remarkably more likely to see the policy indications and make the correct voting choice (Basinger and Lavine 2005). Studies find when getting more informed, Republicans give more support for tax cut, while Democrats are dramatically less likely to endorse it (Bartels 2008). Political experts and public opinion leaders are thought to be more knowledgeable than others (Fiske and Kinder 1981). Without full information about taxation, people may have relied on cues from elites. It is important to understand why Americans choose their tax positions and how presidential campaigns affect their evaluation.

3. Theory and Hypotheses of Attitude Change

My chief task is to test the effects of the 2008 campaign on tax policy positions. **I propose two reasons why voters will shift their positions: cognitive dissonance and elite persuasion.** My first theory is that voters seek to reduce cognitive dissonance by adopting their preferred candidate's issue positions. A possible explanation for opinion change lies in that psychologically people do not want to be different or out of step with the politician they like. Inconsistent attitudes cause psychological discomfort. Voters think their candidates are capable of representing their interests and know better on public policies. They change their initial opinion due to psychological pressures. Voters will move positions to be closer to their candidate's, while alienating themselves with the rival candidate's position.

In addition to cognitive dissonance, elite persuasion can be powerful since the public has demonstrated wide inattention and uncertainty about the tax policies. Campaigns, especially presidential campaigns, provide much information in a wide range of political issues. The electorate may be learning through campaigns, and become responsive to campaign messages. Therefore, taxation is one

of the domains that campaign can effectively sway public opinions. For example, if one likes Obama, he would like to listen to Obama's speech, support Obama's campaign, and align himself with Obama's policy stands. According to Brody and Page (1972), if an individual alters his own issue stands to what he thinks the favored candidate stands, then one is *persuaded* by the candidate.

Based on these theoretical explanations of opinion change during a campaign, I have two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more liberal direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for Obama.

Hypothesis 2: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more conservative direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for McCain.

I also investigate two possible interactive relationships. First, it is possible that the impact is greater on those who are less politically interested, and therefore have not thought as deeply about taxation policy and are more likely to change. Second, it maybe that those who express a higher sense of importance about taxation policy are less likely to change.

Hypothesis 3: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more liberal direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for Obama and they are less interested in politics.

Hypothesis 4: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more conservative direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for McCain and they are less interested in politics.

Hypothesis 5: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more liberal direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for Obama and taxation policy is less important.

Hypothesis 6: Attitudes towards taxation move in a more conservative direction during the campaign if the respondent would have voted for McCain and taxation policy is less important.

4. Data

I use NES survey data from United States Presidential election year of 2008 to test my hypothesis. The data, questionnaires, response rates, and detailed information on the survey methodology are available at the NES website[1]. Table 1 contains the summary statistics for the pooled data.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Wave	5.6	3.611	1	10
TV News	4.870	2.256	0	7
Radio News	3.326	2.555	0	7
Internet News	3.283	2.675	0	7
Print News	3.393	2.812	0	7
Issue Importance	3.282	1.22	1	5
Political Interest	3.670	1.007	1	5
Obama Favorability	2.229	.827	1	3
McCain Favorability	2.217	.787	1	3
Age	50.782	15.785	18	90
Gender	.424	.494	0	1
White	.776	.417	0	1
Education	3.356	1.090	1	5
Income	12.225	4.131	1	19
Partisanship	3.865	2.198	1	7
Vote Choice in 2008	.533	.499	0	1
Opinion on taxation over	.997	.873	0	2

The dependent variable derives from the survey question on whether the respondents “favor or oppose raising taxes on incomes over 200k/yr”. (1) is coded as “oppose”, (2) “neither favor nor oppose” and (3) ``favor". To examine how voters' policy beliefs change over time, the main independent variable *wave* measures when the survey was taken: either January (wave 1) coded (0) or October 2008 (wave 10) coded (1). The causal relationship can only be unidirectional as the time survey was taken cannot be

[1] The NES is website is http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/cdf/cdf.htm

caused by a change in policy beliefs, so it tests how the campaign changes the direction and magnitude of voter's attitudes. Since voters' attitude change can never change time, it gets around the typical problem of endogeneity.

For the control variables, mass media is a major source for voters to get informed on politics. For example, the media can attract voters' attention on certain issue, and cause people attach more importance than it worths. The NES data has survey questions on how many days in a typical week the respondent reads news in print newspaper, reads/watches news on Internet, listens to radio news and watches TV news. The *TV news*, *radio news*, *Internet news*, and *print news* are dichotomous variables coded (0) to (1), measured at January, September and October 2008. *Issue importance* shows what voters think the importance of taxation. To the question "how important this issue to you personally", the variable *tax 200k/yr importance* is measured at January and October, coding from (1) "not important at all" to (5) "extremely important". *Partisanship* is coded for respondents identify themselves as (1) strong Democrat, (2) not very strong Democrat, (3) Independent Democrat, (4) Independent, (5) Independent Republican, (6) not very strong Republican and (7) strong Republican. The *partisanship* is measured at January, September and October 2008. *Candidate favorability* responds to the question "Does R like or dislike John McCain/Barack Obama", ranging from (1) dislike, (2) neither like nor dislike, and (3) like. It is measured at January, February, June, September and October. *Political interest* tests respondent's interest in information about government and politics, measured at January, February, September and October 2008. The answers are scaled from "not interested at all" to "extremely interested".

I also control for the demographical factors. The variable *age* is the respondent's age by the election day in 2008. *Gender* is a dichotomous variable coded (1) as male, (0) as female. *White* is coded as (1) white, (0) if otherwise. *Education* is respondent's educational attainment, coded (1) if the respondent has "no high school diploma", (2) "high school diploma", (3) "some college, no bachelor's degree", (4)

“Bachelor's degree”, and (5) “graduate degree”. *Income* is a categorical variable that based on the respondent's total income of household in the past 12 months.

5. Methods

I use 2008-2009 American National Election Survey (NES) monthly panel study to examine the casual complexities of vote choice and policy stands. The survey was conducted in January (wave 1), February (wave 2), June (wave 6), September (wave 9), October (wave 10), and November (wave 11) in 2008 and other four waves in 2009. In this research, I only utilize data from wave 1 to wave 10 in 2008 (N=1092), which were the only waves that asked the tax policy question regarding the dependent variable.

The data are longitudinal and the dependent variables of issue stands are coded as ordinal. The panel has a large number of observances, while each individual may have a different curve on campaign learning. Therefore, I use a random-effects ordered probit model (Frechette 2001). The previous research lack data of pre and post campaign data (see Lenz 2009). This monthly NES panel data allows me to track voters' policy change over time during the presidential campaign. The data are strongly balanced.

6. Results

In the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama endorsed raising taxes on couples with income over 250,000 per year; John McCain proposed extending Bush tax cut policy. In Table 2, Obama voters demonstrate a positive trend in supporting higher taxation rates on the wealthy as the election approaches. It shows from January to October 2008, those who eventually voted for Obama are becoming more favorable of raising taxes on annual incomes over 200,000. In contrast, McCain voters are becoming more against of raising taxes upon incomes greater 200,000 per year. Using time as inde-

pendent variable gets around the problem of endogeneity. Thus, we can assume a meaningful causal relationship with the variable *wave* in the two models. We see how voters' ideology dynamically moves into two opposite directions.

Table 2: Voters' Position on Raising Taxes Upon Incomes over 200,000 Per Year

Variable	Obama Voters	McCain Voters
Wave	0.028*(.012)	-0.034**(.011)
TV News	0.047(.029)	0.063(.032)
Print News	0.014 (.023)	-0.024(.025)
Radio News	-0.020(.024)	0.019(.026)
Internet News	0.022(.023)	-0.008(.025)
Issue Importance	0.40***(.054)	-0.168** (.054)
Political Interest	0.01(.069)	-0.234***(.073)
Candidate Favorability	0.270*(.110)	0.076(.098)
Partisanship	-0.149***(.041)	0.259***(.046)
Age	0.006(.005)	-0.005(.005)
Gender	0.214(.134)	-0.422** (.140)
White	0.836***(.151)	-0.466(.288)
Education	0.126(.067)	-0.249***(.075)
Income	-0.053**(.018)	-0.113*** (.023)
τ_1	0.858(.454)	-6.526***(.737)
τ_2	1.939***(.467)	-5.318***(.688)
ρ	0.495***(.0756)	0.654*** (.053)
N	1174	1092

Note: Cells represent coefficients and standard errors of random effects probit panel regression models for the determinants of attitude toward increasing taxation on individuals making greater $200,000 per year. Standard error in parentheses.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Issue importance has a highly significant correlation with policy stands of taxation. Those who attach more importance on tax raising are likely to strengthen their policy attitudes. Obama voters and McCain voters have polarized views in raising tax. *Partisanship* shows Republicans are more likely to oppose raising taxes than Democrats. It echoes with the previous scholarship that partisanship strongly

affects policy preferences. As Bartels (2005) assert, policy stands on taxation are shaped by fundamental political values such as party identification and ideology. Additionally, perceptions on personal tax burden matter. Personal economic condition and interests largely correlate with issue stands. But contrary to Bartels's claim that the publics are unable to grasp tax policy in their interests, the variable of *Income* shows that voters with higher income are significantly less favorable of raising taxes.

The results support my hypothesis, that voters adjust their issue ideology towards that of their preferred candidates. Downsian theory advocates voters are learning through the campaign and then choose the candidate that best matched their preference. It echoes with previous scholarship that vote choice explains later changes in issue attitudes (Finkel 1995). Voters' ideologies are moving towards their preferred candidates'. Through media exposure, the electorate are able to learn the issues and gradually adopt their preferred voters' position (Lenz 2009).

Next I examine whether campaigns and mass media produce a process of learning, especially for people with less interest in politics and government. I show in Table 3 the same models as in Table 2, but with *Wave* interacted with *Political Interest*.

Table 3: Interaction Between Political Interest and Wave

Variable	Obama Voters	McCain Voters
Political Interest * Wave	-.008(.012)	.007(.012)
Wave	.046(.031)	-.050(.031)
Political Interest	.027(.091)	.197*(.100)
TV News	.046(.029)	.063(.033)
Print News	.015(.023)	-.023(.025)
Radio News	-.020(.024)	-.020(.026)
Internet News	.022(.023)	-.009(.024)

(continued)

Table 3(continued)

Issue Importance	-.399***(.055)	.166**(.054)
Candidate Favorability	.274*(.110)	.078(.098)
Partisanship	-.150***(.041)	-.260***(.046)
Age	.006(.005)	-.005(.005)
Gender	.216(.134)	-.426**(.141)
White	.838***(.152)	-.465(.289)
Education	.126(.067)	-.249***(.075)
Income	-.053**(.018)	-.114***(.023)
τ_1	-1.504**(.577)	-4.223***(.763)
τ_2	-.420(.570)	-3.012***(.726)
ρ	.497***(.076)	.655***(.052)
N	1174	1092

Note: Cells represent coefficients and standard errors of random effects probit panel regression models for the determinants of attitude toward increasing taxation on individuals making greater $200,000 per year. Standard error in parentheses. In this model, political interest is coded from (1) extremely interested to (5) not interested at all.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

It shows as people have less political interest, they are less susceptible to the campaign effects. When it gets closer to the election day, Obama voters are less likely to support raising taxes, whereas McCain votes are more likely to support. The relationship is not statistically significant, though.

Further, I examine whether campaigns and mass media produce a process of learning, especially for people where taxation is an important issue. I show in Table 3 the same models as in Table 2, but with *Wave* interacted with *Issue Importance*.

Table 4: Interaction Between Issue Importance and Wave

Variable	**Obama Voters**	**McCain Voters**
Importance * Wave	.006(.010)	.002(.010)
Wave	.008(.033)	-.040(.032)
Issue Importance	-.432***(.074)	.156*(.074)
TV News	.047(.029)	.063(.032)
Print News	.014(.023)	-.024(.025)

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Radio News	-.021(.024)	-.020(.026)
Internet News	.023(.023)	-.008(.024)
Political Interest	-.010(.070)	.234***(.074)
Candidate Favorability	.273*(.110)	.078(.098)
Partisanship	-.151***(.041)	-.259***(.046)
Age	.006(.005)	-.005(.005)
Gender	.212(.134)	-.422**(.140)
White	.836***(.151)	-.469(.289)
Education	.127(.067)	-.249***(.075)
Income	-.053**(.018)	-.113***(.023)
τ_1	-1.684**(.571)	-4.149***(.750)
τ_2	-.601(.562)	-2.940***(.713)
ρ	.495***(.076)	.654***(.053)
N	1174	1092

Note: Cells represent coefficients and standard errors of random effects probit panel regression models for the determinants of attitude toward increasing taxation on individuals making greater $200,000 per year. Standard error in parentheses. In this model, issue Importance is coded from (1) extremely important to (5) not important at all.
*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

The results indicate those who attach less importance to taxation are more likely to strengthen support for raising taxes. The effect applies for both Obama voters and McCain voters. However, the relationships do not have statistically significance.

7. Conclusion

The funnel voting-decision making has been debated over sixty years. My findings improve our understanding of the voting process. The process of voting does not simply follow the funnel mode. Prior studies argue campaign information don't relate very much to voting choices (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, McPhee 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). On the contrary, I demonstrate that the campaign plays an important role in shaping voters' issue position. The campaign messages successfully

clarify policies and candidate positions, and alleviate the general deficit of information (Vavreck 2009). In other words, the classical funnel sequence can fundamentally be reversed by campaign messages.

Campaigns facilitate civic education, but also influence the basic issue positions of the electorate. Future research might explore more on how campaign messages impact on other policies, such as social and cultural issues. It would be good to know whether there is any issue selection bias when voters assimilate to the candidate's issue stands. And what drives voters to choose their intended candidate first? The variety of voter responsiveness on campaign messages should be explored more. It also indicates that campaign strategies exert a profound influence on issue opinion. Further, this study implies that political elites define public choice. Elite polarization help the public perceive important differences between parties; and parties provide choices not echos (Key 1966; Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1979; Page 1978). Those who are more exposed and responsive to new information are more likely to be affected by elite polarization (see also Hetherington 2001). Elite communication deserves more academic study.

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