

# Lecture 1

## Theories and methods in political communication and opinion research: An overview

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# Foundational theories: media effects, media-state relationship

Assumption: In a democracy, voter opinion drives political decision making

Thus, how public opinion is formed is essential for the democratic process.

Public opinion is largely formed based on messages from political actors to the public

If these messages are misleading or non-transparent, this distorts the democratic process

# Media effects

- The media landscape influences political communication
  - Televised debates meant different aspects of rhetoric were rewarded by voters
    - Kennedy – Nixon USA 1960
    - Palme – Fälldin Sweden 1976
    - Other examples?
- 90s-00s – shift from "old media" to "new media"
  - From mass exposure to similar content in a (relatively) small number of outlets
  - To an abundance of providers, laterally networked media
- Recently: AI

# Agenda setting theory

”If something is covered a lot by news media, it must be important”  
(Shaw & McCombs, 1972)

- survey studies during the -68 US presidential election
- -> how frequently and prominently an issue was covered influenced how important the issue was deemed to be by the public

*“the press may not be successful all the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963)*

# Agenda setting cont.

- Shaw & McCombs (1972):

*“Regardless of what politicians say, what are the two or three main things which you think the government should concentrate on doing something about?”*

- Strong rank-order correlation between main concerns and issues most covered by news sources (local press, evening news broadcasts, NYT)

# Moderators of agenda-setting

- Stronger effects for unknown or foreign issues (subjects have no direct experience)
  - Inflation (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987)
    - Repeated exposure to news stories about inflation did not affect perception of priority
- Trust in media
- Interpersonal communication

# Agenda-building

- Agenda-setting: news -> receiver
- Agenda-building: ? -> news
  - ideological, sociocultural forces
  - economic incentives
  - organizational influences, e.g. publisher
  - media routines, including journalistic norms
  - the journalists themselves

Some of these are very different in the current media landscape, which?  
How?

# Priming theory

- Originates in psychological networks models of memory
  - information is stored in memory as nodes, with each node corresponding to a concept.
  - nodes (concepts) are connected to one another via associative pathways
  - distance between nodes indicates how related they are.



# Priming theory

- when a node is activated
  - image of a smoking factory chimney -> “global warming”
- this activation can spread to other related nodes
  - for example, “concern”
  - Related to inference (enter pragmatics...)

# The basic media-priming process

- information received through a media channel activates preexisting associated knowledge in the mind of the receiver...
- making this knowledge more accessible -> the receiver is more likely to use it in interpreting and evaluating following utterances (or other stimuli)
- the receiver applies the primed, now more accessible, concept to a target stimulus when s/he would not otherwise have done this.

# Boundary conditions for priming effects

## (1) recency

- the accessibility of primed information in people's minds decays over time

## (2) repetition of exposure

- the frequency with which nodes in people's memory are primed.

# Boundary conditions for priming effects cont.

## (3) applicability

- a primed concept must overlap or be **closely related** to features of the target stimulus to influence evaluation of it.

## (4) subjective relevance

- Similar to applicability, but individual
- If people do not see how a primed concept relates to a given target stimulus, they will not consider it applicable to its evaluation.

# Other parameters: political involvement

- diminishes citizens' susceptibility to (political) priming effects
  - Priming effects are generally smaller among those with greater general interest in politics.
    - However :
      - When coupled with high levels of trust in the media source in question, political knowledge leads to **stronger** priming effects (Miller & Krosnick, 2000).
- The influence of political knowledge on priming effects depends on the political context of the priming situation (e.g., the “easiness” of an issue and how politicized it is).

## Other parameters : cognitive style

- Those who enjoy "effortful cognitive activity" will harbor more expansive and dense cognitive networks.
  - facilitating the activation of more nodes by a given prime—nodes that will be drawn upon during preference formation.
- citizens who have a high need for cognitive closure will be quicker in seizing upon considerations activated by a media prime when coming to political judgment.

# Other parameters: generalized political attitudes

- *Effects strongest if a prime resonates with the general political preferences of its recipient.*
  - *environment prime - liberals - conservatives.*
- *The magnitude of media influence will depend on what audience members bring to the reception situation:*
  - *personality traits (e.g., whether they tend to reflect),*
  - *existing cognitive networks (i.e., their knowledge, the concepts they have stored, and how these are related in their memory),*
  - *social networks*

# *Priming and agenda-setting are closely related*

- *Both effects are grounded in mnemonic models of information-processing*
  - *We form attitudes based what is most salient, and thus most accessible, when making decisions.*
- *By making some issues more salient in people's minds (agenda-setting), the media can shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or other issues (priming).*



# References

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