**Feeling the Issue: Experimental Test of Source Cues in Policy Evaluation**

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Abstract:

This experimental study tests whether the source of an information may influence how citizens process the information. Previous research suggests that affective evaluation of political leaders is reflected in how citizens perceive policy issues. In the light of growing personalization of politics this findig may suggests an important impact of politicians as a key heuristics in voters’ political judgment. The study tests the source cue hypothesis in a new context of the Czech Republic and further extends the focus on political parties, comparing the effects of party and party leader evaluations. The experiment is testing whether references to a party leader or a political party evoke the same reaction in light of a policy propsal.

Extended abstract:

The main focus of my research is the effect of affective attitudes towards political actors on evaluation of political issues.

The main hypotheses of the study are:

* Evaluation of a policy proposal is influenced by affective evaluation of the source of the proposal.
* Positive evaluation of the source of a policy propsal is reflected in positive evaluation of the propsal.
* Negative evaluation of the source of a policy propsal is reflected in negative evaluation of the policy propsal. The negativity effect is expected to be stronger compared to effect of positive evaluation of the source.
* If personalization effect is present, stronger affective reactions are invoked by political leaders compared to political parties.
* If personalization effect is not present there is no difference between leader and party evaluation and its effect on policy evaluation.

The study is based on the research of affective information processing and cognitive heuristics and assumes that the source of a political information influences how citizens process the information and how they build their attitudes towards political issues. Political actors themselves may be used by citizens as cognitive heuristics which may help people make up their minds about politics – either on the basis of personal information about a politician or political party affiliation.

I focus on the affective dimension of political attitudes, since affect works as an integral part of citizens beliefs and behavior (e.g. Marcus et al. 2000). My assumptions are based on the primacy of affect and hot cognition hypotheses, according to which there are automatic affective evaluations (likes or dislikes) of political concepts (leaders, parties, issues etc.) which influence further reasoning about these concepts (Lodge, Taber 2013). If feelings towards the actors work as a heuristics, citizens should support policy proposals of those leaders or parties they like better than of those they don’t. Also, general dislike of the actors is supposed to be more powerful than positive evaluation, because of a negativity bias in information processes (e.g. Holbrook et al. 2001). The study builds on a research by Capelos (2010), which proved similar effects in context of foreign leaders but applies the research questions on domestic actors and policy leaders.

The second dimension of the research focuses on political personalization. In context of multiparty political systems there has been a general decrease of party identification across countries. Political identification is also understood in terms of affective relation towards the parties (Linek 2009). Weak party identification thus indicates a lack of affective bonds towards the parties. On the other hand, increasing role of political leaders is often being discussed as an important process of current politics, however there is no clear consensus about its real impact. Garzia, for example, (2013) has documented an increasing role of the leaders as a source of attitudes towards political parties in Western Europe. Therefore the question of the role of parties and their leaders in the political attitudes is an important question to be further explored.

I have chosen this topic because of the lack of research or even a discussion about the role of affective processes in the Czech political science (even though it has been one of the most progressive topics in the USA or Western Europe). Although the evidence of both source cue and affective influence on political attitudes has been documented in the USA and several West European countries, it is unclear how these processes work in Central European context. The personalization dimension of the research is crucial. From our previous pilot studies we assume very low emotional reactions towards the parties, which would make impossible testing the affect and emotion based theories in the Czech context. If the leaders prove to be more affectively loaded concepts (as assumed by the personalization hypothesis) it would help us to design future research on the topic.

The study is based on a laboratory experiment. Data collection was performed between April 28 and May 14 2015. Experiment is a suitable method to test above stated hypotheses mainly because of the high control of the environment, especially of the information and source of the information that the subjects process.

The study is a key part of my thesis which focuses on the affective processes and heuristics in politics. The experiment will be followed by another study according to the results. It will further explore the relationship between leader and issue evaluation (in what context is the source cue most salient) and how voters – on the other hand - use issues as a heuristics to evaluate political actors.

References:

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