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Honors Project Outline

1/26/95

The Agenda-Setting Effect of Television Newscasts

1. Introduction of the Research Topic

A. The Agenda-Setting Effect

1. The basic agenda-setting hypothesis states that the mass media provide cues to viewers such that those issues given the most emphasis by the mass media will be judged to be the most significant by the public

2. This specific research will examine the role of nightly television newscasts in this process.

3. Research question: What role do television newscasts play in setting the public's political agenda?

4. Thesis: As the amount of significance accorded issues in newscasts increases, the amount of significance given to them by the public increases.

B. Significance of Agenda-Setting Research and Potential Implications

1. Significance for the study of public opinion

2. Significance for the study of political communication

3. Significance for the study of the American

democratic process

II. Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

A. Introduction

1. Purpose of the literature Review
2. Overview of the Literature Review

B. Public Opinion and Its Role in the Democratic Process

1. Historical Development of Conceptions of the Term

a. Two Primary Traditions

1. Public Opinion as an Organic Entity/Community Consensus

2. Public Opinion as an Aggregation of Individual Opinions

2. Discourse regarding the role of public opinion in the Democratic Process Two Primary Debates

a. Normative Debate - What role *should* public opinion play in the democratic process

b. Empirical Debate - What role *does* public opinion play in the democratic process

3. Conception of public opinion adopted for the present study

a. Public opinion as an aggregation of individual opinions

b. Public opinion as a dependent variable

C. Individual Opinion Formation

1. Formation of Long Term Opinion Orientations

a. Psychological Theories

1. Balance Theory

2. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

3. Perception Theories

4. Katz! Functional Approach as a Conciliatory Theory

b. Socialization Theories - Major Agents

1. Family

2. Education and Schooling

3. Reference Groups

4. Mass Media

2. Formation of Short Term Issue Opinions

a. Converse's Theory of Belief Systems, Constraints, and Levels of Conceptualization

b. MacKuen's Research on Individual Responsiveness to Changing Media Agendas

c. Zaller's Opinion Formation Model

3. Proposed Model of Individual Opinion Formation based upon the "Funnel of Causality"

D. Dominance, Nature, and Processing of Television News

1. The Dominance of Televised News

- a. Primary Source of News Information
- b. Most Credible and Believable

2. The Nature of Television News

- a. Dramatic
- b. Fragmentary and Episodic
- c. Uniformity
- d. Authoritative
- e. President-Centered
- f. Election Reporting

3. The Processing of Television News

- a. Graber's Theories as a Link to Opinion Formation Models
- b. Agenda Setting Theories

E. The Agenda-Setting Function of Television News

1. Definition of the Concept

2. Support for the Basic Concept

- a. McCombs and Shaw (1972)
 - b. Iyengar and Kinder (1987)
 - c. Downs (1972)
 - d. Benton and Frazier (1976)
3. Research on Contingent Conditions
- a. Variable of Time Span
 - b. Individual Level Factors
 - c. Need for Orientation
 - d. Interaction of Real-World Experiences
4. McCombs' Transactional Model of Agenda-Setting

III. Theoretical Framework

A. Purpose

1. To examine the role of the mass media in the formation of public opinion by determining the power of television news to set the public political agenda
2. To establish a correlation between the significance given to issues in nightly national newscasts and ensuing shifts in public opinion on those issues
3. Explore the implications of the research for the democratic process and the role of public opinion

B. Assumptions

1. That newscast viewership is pervasive enough to generalize results to the entire population
2. That the content of each network's nightly newscast is significantly uniform
3. That the attention paid by -viewer's to network news is sufficient to allow for influence

C. Hypothesis

1. Directional hypothesis: There is a positive correlation between the level of significance accorded issues in television newscasts and the significance given those issues by the public
2. Null hypothesis: There is no relationship between the level of significance accorded issues in television newscasts and the significance given those issues by the public

D. Variables

1. Independent variable is the amount of significance attributed to an issue in nightly newscasts
2. Dependent variable is the amount of significance given to an issue by the general public
3. Operationalization of Variables
 - a. Independent Variable will be operationalized through content analysis of the weeknight newscasts of NBC, CBS, and ABC over a period of 24 days from October 18, 1994 to November 18, 1994

i. The Unit of Analysis will be the individual stories which will be analyzed in terms of the treatment of issues

ii. Main operations variables

aa. The amount of time allocated to an issue or proportion of newscast dedicated to the issue

bb. The position of the issue within newscasts

iii. Extraneous variables measured

aa. Type of story the issue is reported in - Report, Anchor Delivered, or Commentary

bb. Presence or Absence of Film Footage

cc. National or International Nature of the Story

dd. Presence or Absence of Polling Data within the Story

iv. Reliability of content analysis will be tested through the use of a 25 percent sample of material content analyzed by an unbiased second party and compared to the original analysis

b. Dependent variable will be operationalized by public opinion polls – Specific polls have not

been selected.

i. Polls will focus on the question of what is the most important issue or problem facing the United States

ii. Preliminary analysis also points toward the use of polls that would focus on specific issues and their importance

aa. Middle East Peace Process

bb. Bosnia / Former Yugoslavia

cc. Voter Anger and Cynicism

dd. Illegal Immigrants

ee. Crime

ff. Economy

E. Design

1. The study employs a time series design in which a trend of change can be established in the dependent variable related to changes in the independent variable

2. More specifically, it measures the change in the level of significance given to the issues by the public over the five week period in which news content is analyzed.

3. A pretest measure, 5 weekly measures, and a post-test measure of public opinion is compared to data on the independent variables taken from the analysis of news content in order to assess the level of correlation

between independent and dependent variables.

F. Statistical Measure

1. The study employs regression analysis and partial correlation to assess amount of correlation
2. The independent and dependent measures are placed on interval scales which measure significance given to an issue in terms of degrees or levels
3. Calculation of the regression equation measures the specific amount of public opinion change which occurs for each specific amount of change in the significance accorded issues in newscasts
4. Partial correlation allows an examination of the correlation between the dependent and independent variable when controlling for the extraneous variables outlined above

IV. Results - This section will outline the regression equation and partial correlations found based upon the data collected

V. Discussion/Analysis - This section will interpret the results of the present study in terms of the conceptual framework developed in the literature review. The discussion will focus on:

- A. Whether the con-elation found supports the agenda setting hypothesis
- B. How the present results compare with the prevailing theories in agenda setting research
- C. 'Me implications of the results for theories of opinion formation

D. The implications of the results for the democratic process and the role which public opinion plays in it.