Modeling Voter Ideology and Responses toward Public Policies using Affect Control Theory

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How does the public come to buy into a policy? This is a long-standing issue that remains relevant at state- and national-levels. For decades, scholars of social movement theories have suggested that the social problems that the policy addresses should be framed in a manner that attends to ideologies held by members of the public, but this interplay is rarely modeled

Specifically, we developed a methodological approach that uses the mathematical tenets of affect control theory to model 1) how voters interpret frames of social problems and policies; and 2) how interpretation varies based on voter ideology. The first demonstration of our approach explained why the Iowa Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), despite having bipartisan support, failed to pass voter referendum in 1980. The Iowa ERA, and other amendments like it, was proposed to address gender inequality. We identified two gender ideologies (feminist and conservative family values) that were salient at the time of the referendum, and used Interact to model how voters adopting each ideology may interpret different frames about the amendment. The Interact simulations suggested that frames that depict how a public policy conflicts with ideology are more successful at mobilizing than frames that depict how it confirms ideology. Because proponents of the Iowa ERA tended to use the latter approach, while opponents used the former approach, the simulations offer one explanation for why the amendment failed.

We are planning two more empirical demonstrations that build on this method. First, we will model poll data collected after all three 2016 Presidential Debates by taking into account the frames used by each candidate to depict their proposed policies and voter ideology. Second, we will model public interest in recently passed Death with Dignity Acts that legalize physician-assisted death by comparing frames for and against the policies and differing ideologies about end-of-life care.