

RESPONSE TO MACDONALD AND RABINOWITZ

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Macdonald and Rabinowitz make three major arguments in their commentary on our adjustment for projection, which – in the empirical portion of our paper (Merrill and Grofman, 1997) – we apply to voter perceptions of candidate positions in issue-space. They argue that (1) any use of voter-specific placement of candidates – with or without correction – nullifies the link between voter choice and candidate strategy, (2) voters do not process political information in a memory-based fashion and (3) any correction procedure for rationalization/projection effects is likely to be incomplete and flawed.

The first point – were it valid – would be the most telling. If the use of voter-specific placement by us and by many other researchers reduced subsequent findings to a mere psychological study of voters' behavior with no consequences for actors on the political stage, the empirical aspects of our study and those of others would lose some of their bite. But this is simply not the case. If a candidate changes his/her position in issue-space, it is reasonable to believe that the distribution of voter perceptions of that position will not remain static but will move in response to candidate movement. In particular, the mean perception of candidate location will change in accord with the candidate's change.

The second point – which suggests that the relationship of information to individual perceptions can be complex – no doubt is correct. But it is hard to see how this point justifies their insistence that only mean candidate placement can be used in a model, since mean candidate placement is a parameter *which is unknown to the average voter*. Not all voters will necessarily locate the candidate in the same position – especially since, on the one hand, there will be subjective interpretations of the scale presented by the survey instrument and, on the other hand, different voters are exposed to different information flows. We remain troubled by the failure of Rabinowitz and his colleagues to acknowledge the importance for model testing of that indisputable fact.

The third objection focuses on possible flaws in the correction procedure itself. First, a caveat. We certainly do not claim that the procedure we use completely eliminates the effects of projection or that it reduces these effects without introducing some new sources of bias. No procedure can do that. The choice is between imperfect alternatives. As we have argued in our paper, both voter-specific placement without correcting for projection and use of mean placement alone contribute significant biases, albeit each

in different ways. Our projection adjustment is simply the best we can do at this point.

Now let us turn to the specific supposed 'flaws' in the correction procedure that are found by Macdonald and Rabinowitz. Their main objection is that the procedure does not properly handle the case of a voter who locates himself/herself at or near the mean candidate placement but does not like the candidate. They argue that the projection for such a voter – who might try to move his placement of the candidate either up or down but in any case away from his/her own position – should reflect high variance, whereas our procedure predicts no projection at all.

Again this is a reasonable point as far as it goes. But it does not go nearly as far as Macdonald and Rabinowitz would claim. Using the 1988 NES, they cross-classify the respondents by self-placement and by like or dislike of the candidate (based on thermometer scores). They find, for example, that voters who self-place at 5 on the seven-point liberal/conservative scale (close to Bush's mean placement at 5.11) but dislike Bush have a standard deviation almost twice as high as that for those who place themselves at the same location but who like Bush. We will call the former respondents the agree/dislike group. A similar, but less pronounced, effect occurs for Dukakis.

Investigation of the 37 respondents who place themselves near Bush but nevertheless dislike him is revealing. over half of them placed Bush to the left of (i.e. more liberal than) Dukakis on the liberal/conservative scale yet on six ~~or~~ the seven substantive issues, the mean placement for Bush of these latter respondents was to the right of Dukakis and to the right of the neutral point.

Almost certainly, these voters reversed the meanings of the words 'liberal' and 'conservative'. Since they placed themselves as liberals on the substantive issues, it is not surprising that they did not like Bush. When their liberal placements of Bush (on the liberal/conservative scale) are mixed in with the more conservative placements of respondents who got the word meanings right, it is also not surprising that the variance of placements of Bush by the full set of 37 in the agree/dislike group is high. However, as soon as the voters who are simply confused about the meaning of the terms liberal and conservative are deleted, the standard deviation for the remaining 16 in the agree/dislike group is 1.10 compared to 0.86 for those who place themselves at 5 and like Bush. Even this slightly higher variance is subject to alternative explanations: for example, respondents who 'agree with' but dislike Bush are likely to be making their choice on grounds other than issues, so their placements would be expected to have high variance.

Inclusion in the data set of the voters confused about ideological terms also explains why Macdonald and Rabinowitz's estimates of the projection

coefficient are so much higher than ours (they obtain 0.29 and 0.45 for Bush and Dukakis, respectively; we obtain 0.13 and 0.25, respectively). As we indicate in our paper, we delete those respondents from the data set who place the Democrat to the right of the Republican on the liberal/conservative scale, a deletion not performed by Macdonald and Rabinowitz. u/

This deletion is necessary to obtain a meaningful regression in the correction procedure for the following reason. Consider a respondent who is conservative and understands that Bush is conservative but due to word-meaning reversal, places both him/herself and Bush as liberal. In the regression model, both the independent and dependent coordinates for this respondent are displaced from the typical respondent by a distance approximately equal to twice the distance from Bush's mean placement to the neutral point. A few of these outliers are sufficient to dominate the regression and force the coefficient upward toward 1.0. In fact, even if there were no projection and all *non* meaning-reversers placed Bush at the same location, the presence of a few meaning-reversers would cause the coefficient to be substantially above zero. Hence the estimates reported by Macdonald and Rabinowitz are artifacts of this misinterpretation of the scale by a handful of voters and do not vitiate the findings of our analyses.

In sum, we appreciate the comments by Macdonald and Rabinowitz but would argue that their objections are either totally unjustified or have only limited force. First, that candidates would not respond to movement of the overall distribution of voter perceptions of their locations simply defies reason. Second, while biases do result from using voters' perceptions of candidate positions (a fact we fully acknowledge in our paper), their supposition that all voters base their utility on the *mean* perception is obviously counterfactual. Third, the regression model we use – originally developed by Markus and Converse (1979) – cannot perfectly adjust for the effects of projection, but we believe that its use can be quite informative both about the magnitude of projection and in terms of comparisons of the predictive fit of alternative models. We report estimates of regression parameters for both the projection-adjusted and unadjusted model (Merrill and Grofman, 1997: Table 4). Our major empirical finding – that there is a negative relationship between incumbency and the intensity component of voter utility – holds for both estimates.

1. Macdonald and Rabinowitz also report estimates of the projection coefficient based on use of thermometer scores to measure like or dislike. As we point out in our paper, this employs the same variable as both independent and dependent variable and is statistically meaningless.



REFERENCES

- Markus, Gregory A. and Philip E. Converse (1979) 'A Dynamic Simultaneous Equation Model of Electoral Choice', *American Political Science Review* 73: 1055-70.
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