A good survey is a good conversation

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
How can we use survey data to understand campaign effects?

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Three Goals

1. Understanding survey responses
   - Crigler, Berinsky, Malhotra examples

2. Coming to terms with the counter-factuals & the assumptions in design/analysis
   - Can I just change the values of X? (Pacek et al 2010)

3. Isolating the role of Barack Obama’s race in 2008
   - Jackman & Vavreck (2010)
What do we get from surveys?

TRUTH?

MEASURING SOMETHING

(close to the truth)
Lynn’s Five Rules of Survey Research

- 1. Never forget they are “lying” to you
- 2. Help them, help you (learn what you need to know)
- 3. Variables must vary
- 4. Never write a question or design a survey without a final model in mind
- 5. Don’t make them do math
Rule #1: Never forget they’re “lying” to you!

- Comprehension/Interpretation
  - Guessing at purpose
  - Affected by previous questions

- Retrieval
  - Memory (time)
  - Cues, examples

- Estimation/Judgment
  - Summarize? Add?

- Reporting
  - Acquiescence
  - Social Desirability
  - Satisficing

- Grammar
- Complexity
- Faulty premise
- Vague concepts
- Vague quantifiers
- Unfamiliar terms
- False inferences

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Rule #2: Help them, help you!

- **Use cues for timeframes, memory aides**
  - “How many political advertisements did you see yesterday?”
  - “Which of the following TV shows do you watch on a typical Monday?”

- **Use tools to help them recall information**
  - “Take a minute to think back to the last time you talked about politics…”

- **Help them in the outcome choices**
  - “How well do you communicate with your spouse?”
    - We are busy, but we find time to talk on the phone during the day
    - We email or text during the day, but phone calls are rare
    - We used to be better, but lately we are both just too busy to touch base during the day

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Rule #3: Variables must vary
- A constant won’t explain much variation in Y.

Rule #4: Always have final model in mind
- What will you do with these variables/questions?

Rule #5: Never make them do math
QUESTION ON SURVEY in 2008

- Crigler and Mills (2008)
  - “When deciding who to support for president this November, how important are each of the following to defining who you are?”
    - Race, gender, religion, socio-economic, ideology, political party
    - Not at all important (1) to Very important (7)

What is going on here?

- What vague concept are Crigler and Mills trying to measure?
- What’s wrong with this operationalization of it?
- Could they have done it better?
The Craft of Writing Questions

- Berinsky (2009)

“As you may know, since the war in Iraq began in March 2003, the United States has spent almost 200 billion dollars (or “a large amount of money”) on operations in Iraq. All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war with Iraq was worth fighting, or not?”

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
“Some people have proposed that the U.S. government should increase the number of H1-B visas, or allowances, for U.S. companies to hire workers from foreign countries to work in highly skilled occupations, such as computer programming, engineering, & high technology. In past years, there has been demand for such visas for workers from (India/Russia/Canada). Do you think the U.S. should increase the number of visas for workers from (India/Russia/Canada)?”
Writing good questions takes practice

But so does what you do with those questions!

Good questions are not enough. You also need a good analytic design.

How will you put the evidence to work for you? How will you make your argument?

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Counter-Factuals in Campaign Studies

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Did Obama’s Race Matter?

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
How can we know this?

- Election-level characteristics need election-level analyses.
- We cannot understand the role of Obama’s race looking at the 2008 Obama-McCain contest alone.
- Cross-sectional data cannot tell us anything about whether election-level factors were pivotal to outcomes.
- We need the same election, same voters, same time, with white Obama not Black Obama.

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Pacek et al JOP (2010)

- Affect Misattribution Test
- Related to vote choice in 2008
- Claim: if there were “no racists” Obama would have done 12.5 points better than he did.
  - How do they know this?
    - They “change” the values of X from least racist to most racist and calculate vote for Obama
- This is their counterfactual
  - They changed *respondents’ affect* not Obama’s race
Remember the question is:

Did Obama’s Race Matter?
What’s wrong with this?

- Assumes that nothing else about respondent changes
- Their counterfactual is a world with different VOTERS not a world with existing voters and a WHITE Obama
- FUNDAMENTAL FLAW: ASSUMES effect is due to Obama’s race
  - We need to know what would have happened if we changed the same values of X for Kerry in 2004, Gore in 2000, Clinton in 1996, etc . . .
- Assumes Obama exceptionalism instead of demonstrating it
Obama’s Advantage? Race, Partisanship, & Racial Attitudes in Context

Simon Jackman & Lynn Vavreck
Jackman & Vavreck:
Two sets of Counter-Factuals

December 2007 through November 2008: asked simple “head-to-head” match-ups of possible 2008 candidates

Add data from the ANES going back to 1992 to get comparisons to fall campaigns

Test simple vote model
Match-ups (Dependent Variable)

“Thinking about the general election in November, who would you vote for if the election was a choice between...”


ANES data from 1992 forward in October.
How will we know whether Obama’s race mattered?

- Do not change anything about respondents
- Vary the choices they get
- We have 33 possible “sets” of choices
- Are Obama coefficients different on things relating to race (and other things too maybe)?

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Analyses

Dependent Variable: 2-party vote in match-up (D=1, R = 0).

Bayesian hierarchical model with candidate off-sets by issue and effects for time.

Predictors:
- Racial Resentment
- Racial Stereotypes
- Economic Retrospections
- Party Identification

Looking for Obama “exceptionalism” in parameter estimates
Democrats would have won

- Even if they had nominated Hillary Clinton
- … And with almost same vote share
- But support would have come from different parts of the population

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Did Obama’s Race Matter?

- Yes – he got support from Independents and Republicans with liberal racial attitudes and lost support among Democrats with conservative racial attitudes

- No – it didn’t affect the outcome
Can survey data help us show campaign effects?

- Level of analysis is the *campaign*, not the respondent
- Need multiple “campaigns”
  - We had 33 “elections”
  - In ANES, you have 16 elections
- Marry contextual data to survey data
- Find counter-factuals that make sense
- Understand implicit assumptions in your design, analysis, and modeling

LYNN VAVRECK, University of California Los Angeles
Don’t conflate voter decision making with campaign effects