A Partisan/Nonpartisan Schematic Approach to Interpreting Political Cartoons

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   ABSTRACT: Modern political science research has virtually ignored political cartoons, although both empirical and normative studies are found in other disciplines. Q technique has not been widely accepted in political science circles, which may have contributed to the lack of attention to cartoons, and political humor more generally, within the discipline. In this exploratory study, I conduct a Q-methodological experiment featuring partisan and nonpartisan schematics and their responses to political cartoons about the 1992 presidential election and partisan politics. The experiment offers an assessment of the emotional impact of these cartoons, and utilizes an information-processing framework for analyzing rational reactions as well.

Introduction

Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall apparently recognized the importance of Thomas Nast's political cartoons by saying: "Let's stop them damn pictures! I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents can't read; but, damn it, they can see pictures!"[1]
   If indeed "one picture is worth a thousand words," then perhaps it is possible to learn some important lessons from serious research on these "damn pictures".
   Because political cartoons rely on abstraction and analogy, it would seem fitting to study them with a methodology that addresses subjectivity. Q methodology is appropriate to the task. In this exploratory study, I conduct a Q-methodological experiment dealing with political cartoons about partisan politics and the 1992 presidential election.
   Beck and Sorauf (1992) note that party identification is a type of

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"political gyroscope, stabilizing political outlooks against the buffetings of short-term influences" (p. 177). It is this emotional attachment to the party that has allowed party identification to serve as:

> the primary source of orientation for an individual's political attitudes, just as religious denomination acts as an orientation for religious matters. Once one becomes psychologically attached to a party one tends to see political matters as other party members do (Wattenberg, 1994, p. 12).

This psychological attachment allows party identification to serve as an easy point of entry to the growing literature of "schema theory".

Schemas (or schemata) are highly individualized, serve many purposes, and are used by some people more effectively than others to organize their life experiences (Fiske, Kinder, & Larter, 1983; Graber, 1984; Kinder, 1983; Thorson & McKeever, 1983). What is relevant to a personally held schema is more likely to be retrieved from memory and can help evaluate new experiences (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Schemas also offer a reasonable way to infer information that goes beyond what is given (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977) and thereby help to simplify decision-making for the individual.

A schema contains both the attributes of the concept and the relationships among the attributes, and is maintained in memory in an abstract form. Much attention has been given to how schematic knowledge is stored in memory and how such stored information is retrieved (Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983; Fiske, 1986; Lodge & Stroh, 1993; Wyer & Ottati, 1993). Most of this research has linked schemas to some aspect of information processing.

Information processing models are interactive between the message itself and the schemas of the audience interpreting the message. The salience of the message will differ between individuals because schemas among individuals are prioritized differently. In addition, the rules for linking different stimuli vary across different types of "schematics" (Entman, 1989). "Schematics" are individuals who have developed elaborate knowledge structures unlike "aschematics" who have failed to do so for whatever reason (Markus, 1977).

Lodge and Hamill (1986) have found rather compelling evidence for "partisan schematics." They expected to find significant differences between the abilities of partisan schematics and aschematics in categorizing party-relevant information. By testing the memory recall capacities between the schematics and aschematics on information consistent with partisan schemas, they also sought to examine directly the effects of a partisan schema on memory itself. They were not

disappointed in either quest.

Following their lead, the first question to be answered in this exploratory study is:

Will self-identified strong partisans differ significantly from nonpartisan identifiers in assessing political cartoons focused on partisan themes?

If a significant difference is found, the assumption is that within the partisan schematic group, there will be a noticeable difference between strong Democrats and strong Republicans viewing the same cartoons. A second question pertains to how the partisan and nonpartisan schematics differ in their interpretations of political cartoons.

The Experiment

The Q sample is ordinarily a collection of statements theoretically relevant to the topic of interest. Instead of statements about cartoons, I utilized copies of the editorial cartoons themselves. An 8" x 11" reproduction of each cartoon was made so that it would be easy for the subject to see all the details. The total N = 75 cartoons.

Because the main theoretical interest was in how self-identified partisans and nonpartisans interpreted the cartoons, a structured sample was created. There was a deliberate attempt to include cartoons containing purely partisan symbols (i.e., elephants/GOP for the Republicans and donkeys for the Democrats). A variety of cartoonists' works were used in order to avoid one particular style being preferred over another. In all, 29 cartoonists' works, the majority of which were originally published in local daily newspapers, were represented in the Q sample.

The 1992 presidential election offered a unique opportunity for distinguishing partisans' from nonpartisans' views because of Ross Perot's candidacy. Perot, a truly independent candidate, made a failed yet impressive bid for the presidency. He was not a maverick from one of the major parties, and until his inexplicable withdrawal from the campaign, he was running neck and neck with both Bill Clinton and George Bush. Included in the Q sample were 18 cartoons featuring Ross Perot, 13 of Clinton, and 13 of Bush.

Particular care was taken to insure that the P-set would have a variety of self-identified partisans and nonpartisans according to the Michigan model of party identification. In 1936, George Gallup began asking survey respondents, "Do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, or something else?" His research standardized

survey questions regarding party identification ever since. The classic
"Michigan model" of party identification added a dimensional aspect to
partisanship by asking how strongly one associated with the stated
preferred party. The National Election Studies have used a similar two-
part question:

> 1. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican,
> Democrat, Independent, or what?

> 2. If Democrat or Republican, would you call yourself a strong or
> weak Democrat or Republican? If independent, are you closer to the
> Republican Party or the Democratic Party?

In-depth interviews were conducted with each subject utilizing both the
standard and branching NES questions regarding party identification.
Open-ended questions about the respondents' feelings toward the parties
were also asked. Information regarding their ideological leanings,
reading habits, and certain demographic and background characteristics
was also requested.

Eleven of the sixteen subjects had advanced degrees (eight Doctor-
ates and three Masters), and most claimed to be daily readers of the
editorial pages in local and/or national newspapers. Over 80% of the
subjects were actual voters in the last four presidential elections, and
69% of those voters had consistently voted for the same party.
Self-placed ideological leanings reflected a slight preference for
conservatism. Four claimed to be on the liberal side; six identified
themselves as "moderate"; and the other six placed themselves among
the conservative categories. Table 1 shows the party identifications
made by the total subject pool.

Table 1
Person Sample for the Cartoon Study

Party Affiliation	*n*
Strong Democrat	4
Independent Leaning Toward Democrat	1
Independent	2
Independent Leaning Toward Republican	4
Weak Republican	1
Strong Republican	4

Ordinarily, prior to the actual start of the Q-sorting process, the

subjects are required to read through all the statements in order to become familiar with their content. In this study, the subjects were asked to explain the message of each cartoon, and were also encouraged to identify those cartoons which they "just didn't get." LeRoy Carl (1968) conducted door-to-door interviews of a random sample of individuals in three different communities (two in New York and one in Pennsylvania) in order to determine if the meanings that cartoonists attributed to their work were shared by the general public. Barely 15% of those interviewed understood the message of the cartoon. It was useful to know how each subject was understanding the message of the cartoons for later factor analysis, especially since some of the cartoons had such apparently disparate meanings.[2]

After the cartoons were interpreted, the subject was instructed to sort them according to the following distribution where -5 meant "least like my opinion" and +5 meant "most like my opinion."

(Score)										
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	-0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
(3)	(5)	(5)	(9)	(9)	(13)	(9)	(9)	(5)	(5)	(3)

(Frequency)

Table 2 shows the factor loadings for these 16 subjects.[3]

The principal components (PC) method of factor analysis assumes no error (i.e., that each Q sort would correlate with itself 1.00), which is typically a questionable assumption in Q methodology where test-retest

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[2]Cartoon #37 was one of those cartoons subject to different interpretations. It portrayed two elephants sitting on a scaffold with one painting a huge sign reading "BUSH" and directly underneath it "QUAEMP". The other elephant looks at the painter and says "...er.." Subject #1 thought it was a pun on Bush, Quayle, and Shemp advancing some sort of "Three Stooges" imagery suggesting that the Republican ticket was a joke. Subject #18 chose to use the Latin pronunciation of "Quaemp" which she believed was an intended slap at Bush's "wimp" image. Others found in this cartoon a suggestion that the GOP wanted to switch out Jack Kemp (the EMP) for Dan Quayle during the campaign. Still others believed that the "Quaemp" was a deliberate misspelling of Quayle's name poking fun at the vice-president after the "potato(e)" spelling incident.

[3]The original study included 42 subjects which accounts for the subject numbers being sometimes greater than 16.

correlations, although high, typically fall short of unity. However, PC is readily available in statistical software compilations (such as SPSS) and is often used, and it has the advantage of extracting factors which account for maximum total variance; in this case, moreover, it provided results similar to a principal axis analysis, which has assumptions more nearly in line with Q-methodological practice. Ultimately, the acceptability of the four factors which were extracted (and subjected to varimax rotation), as with any factors, is in their meaning and interpretability, and in this regard the interpretations which follow should stand up well to scrutiny.

Table 2
Factor Loadings for the "Like My Opinion" Sort

S#	A	B	C	D	Party	Ideol	Educ
		Factors					
9	86	05	04	-06	SDem	ExLib	PhD
18	84	-08	-02	-07	SDem	ExLib	PhD
26	-72	25	38	-01	SRep	ExCon	EdD
17	71	-02	20	13	SDem	Lib	PhD
38	-66	22	31	-10	SRep	Con	MA
34	-62	28	38	-17	SRep	SlCon	EdD
20	54	16	09	-07	SDem	SlLib	PhD
16	53	-07	27	27	IRep	Mod	HS
19	13	82	-05	18	Ind	Mod	EdD
37	-20	60	-03	-37	WRep	SlCon	PhD
4	-05	54	33	40	IRep	Mod	HS
1	-31	49	32	39	SRep	Con	BA
32	-04	-08	74	14	IRep	SlCon	MA
24	15	14	72	-01	Ind	Mod	MA
33	-16	18	11	76	IRep	Mod	GED
36	34	-04	-04	62	IDem	Mod	HS

NOTE: Decimals to two places have been omitted. Factor loadings of +/-31 are significant at the $p < .01$ level. *Party*: SDem is Strong Democrat; SRep is Strong Republican; IDem is Independent Leaning Toward Democrats; IRep is Independent Leaning Toward Republicans; Ind is Independent (does not lean toward a party); WDem is Weak Democrat; WRep is Weak Republican. *Ideology*: ExLib is extremely liberal; ExCon is extremely conservative; Con is conservative; Lib is liberal; Mod is moderate; SlCon is slightly conservative; SlLib is slightly liberal.

Factor A appeared to be a partisan factor, with all the Strong Democrats loaded positively on it while the Strong Republicans loaded

heavily in the opposite direction. All of the Strong Republicans also loaded significantly on factor C, which was an issue-oriented factor. This was not surprising since many of the cartoons depicting Republicans were centered on the issues of nationalized health care, the Whitewater investigation, and crime, while many of the Democratic cartoons focused on the image of the party rather than issues.

Factor B reflected a pronounced disdain for both political parties. These anti-partisans reflected an attitude of animosity toward both parties, lending credence to those scholars who suggest that the political parties have lost salience among the general public (Burnham, 1970; Pomper, 1976). It is interesting to note that two of the subjects on this factor had identified themselves with the Republican party rather than as Independents.

Factor D nonpartisans shared the anti-partisan views of factor B. Both factor B and D nonpartisans also shared an admiration for Ross Perot, although factor D nonpartisans seemed to be a bit more candidate-oriented than those in factor B. Factor D nonpartisans seemed to conform with Wattenberg's contention that candidate-centered politics can replace the need for political parties altogether in the minds and hearts of Independents (Wattenberg, 1991).

.Factor C nonpartisans were more concerned with issues than with personalities or with holding both parties in contempt. Factor C nonpartisans also differed significantly from those in factors B and D regarding Ross Perot. Mr. Perot's attacks on the major parties delighted factors B and D nonpartisans, while factor C nonpartisans found this Independent candidate dangerous and undeserving.

Intensive Analysis

In this study, two subjects were chosen from the original pool of 16 to participate in an exploratory in-depth analysis.[4] They were selected because of the way that their Q sorts had factored on the opinion analysis. Subject #1 had loaded significantly on each of the three nonpartisan factors; and, although she was a self-identified "Strong Republican," she did not seem to use a partisan schema. Subject #18 identified herself as a "Strong Democrat" and significantly loaded only on the partisan factor. Her individual Q sort also showed the highest

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[4]The sorting process was done in two separate sessions by Subject #18 (each taking approximately 4 hours) and in only one 10 hour session by Subject #1 (with several short breaks during the session).

negative correlations with the Strong Republicans.

The following sorting instructions were placed on the same -5 to +5 scale for comparison to the original "opinion" Q-sorting instruction; and given to both subjects in a random order.

Table 3
Conditions of Instruction for Intensive Analysis

Tell Others	= Unlikely to tell(-5)/Likely to tell others(+5)
Remember	= Easy to forget (-5)/Easy to Remember (+5)
Understand	= Difficult to get (-5)/Easy to get (+5)
Think	= Unlikely to (-5)/Likely to cause deeper thought(+5)
ConLib	= Conservative message(-5)/Liberal message(+5)
Critic	= Critical of Democrats(-5)/Critical of GOP(+5)
Opinion	= Unlike my opinion(-5)/Like my opinion(+5)
Humorous	= Serious-minded message(5)/Humorous message(+5)
Angry	= Message pleases me (-5)/Message angers me (+5)

From a survey of over one-half of the 200 full-time editorial cartoonists employed by American daily newspapers, Ernest Hynds (1977) found that 95% considered their most important contribution was "making people think" (p. 95). There was a set of instructions intended to discern if the cartoons were indeed making these subjects think. Other instructions were given to determine if the cartoons were easily understood; to assess how easily remembered the cartoons might be; and, to gauge the willingness of these subjects to transmit the message of the cartoon to others.

Although Conover and Feldman (1984) and Entmann (1989) had limited success in finding a "liberal-conservative" schema, an instruction was included to see if these subjects were able to employ a liberal/conservative continuum in assessing these cartoons. In addition, an instruction to assess the perception of criticism being levied at the parties was included.

Finally, the emotional responses of these subjects were of interest. Fiske and Taylor (1984) have shown that people's moods can influence their memory, and that emotions can have a profound impact on cognitive processing. Conover and Feldman (1986) have also argued that emotional responses should not be divorced from studies of information processing: "Although the cognitive consequences of media exposure may be minimal, significant emotional reactions may still occur even in the absence of substantial cognitive processing of the information..." (p. 512).

One of the conditions of instruction was designed to assess which cartoons were found humorous and which ones were of a more serious nature. Another was designed to tap into these subjects' levels of anger engendered by the cartoons.

Both subjects were asked to perform with the same set of 75 cartoons according to the multiple conditions of instruction—all by way of exploring the various cognitive and emotional-response possibilities. These individual Q sorts were factored together along with the original "opinion" Q sorts for both subjects.

· The factor analyses on the individual subjects' Q sorts extracted three factors for each subject. Table 4 shows the individual factor loadings for Subject #1. Table 5 shows the individual factor loadings for Subject #18. Factor scores were computed by weighting the factor scores according to the factor loadings using Creaser's (1955) technique.[5]

Table 4
Factor Loadings for Subject #1 Analysis

| | | Factors | |
Q Sort	1	2	3
Remember	**88**	-16	23
Understand	**87**	0	06
Think	**85**	-11	-17
Tell Others	**68**	-17	**59**
ConLib	-13	**88**	-10
Critic	02	**87**	-05
Angry	-13	**79**	-16
Opinion	**52**	**-57**	-01
Humorous	-01	-15	**95**

Decimals to two places have been omitted. Factor
loadings +/-31 are significant (*p* < .01)

Factor One

: It would appear that Subject #1's proclivity for remembering cartoons was a function of how easily understood they were and how much they caused her to think (loading at .88, .87, and .85, respective-

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[5]All factor scores and original *z*-scores are available from the author by request. Also available are copies of the actual cartoons used in this study.

Table 5
Factor Loadings for Subject #18 Analysis

Q Sort	Factors		
	1	2	3
Tell Others	**90**	-05	-13
Remember	**87**	20	01
Understand	**83**	04	02
Think	**78**	09	37
ConLib	05	**96**	04
Critic	0	**89**	12
Opinion	18	**84**	-14
Humorous	-01	-19	**-83**
Angry	06	-18	**82**

Decimals to two places have been omitted. Factor
loadings +/-31 are significant ($p < .01$).

ly). She was also likely to tell others about these cartoons, which sent
a message consistent with her own opinions. Subject #18's dominant
component centered on which cartoons were likely to be shared with
others. Subject #18 was willing to tell others about cartoons she was
most likely to remember. Perhaps the retelling of the cartoons would
help her remember the cartoons. These cartoons were more easily
understood as well, and the capacity for making her think about their
message was implicated as well, replicating a pattern seen for Subject
#1.

Factor Two

Factor two could best be described as an ideological and partisan,
yet somewhat emotional, factor. Both subjects' sorts on the criticism of
political parties and the liberal/conservative continuum appeared on this
factor as did their opinion sorts. Subject #1's opinion Q sort loaded
significantly in the correct, negative direction. The negative direction
of her opinion loading was consistent with the design of the instruc-
tions: those cartoons which were critical of conservatives and the
Republicans made her angry and were quite clearly at odds with her
opinion.

The emotional aspect of this factor was found in Subject #1's Q sort
on which cartoons made her angry. She seemed particularly incensed
by cartoons critical of George Bush. She voted for Bush in 1992 and

described her commitment to that voting choice as "very strong." She also claimed to be a great admirer of Barbara Bush. Cartoon #72, which depicts Barbara unflatteringly, received a +5 "most angry" rating.

Subject #1 and Subject #18 were in considerable agreement (correlated extremely highly at .91) about which cartoons were critical of the Democrats and Republicans. They both distinguished the party from the presidential candidates aligned with the parties. In fact, of the top 16 cartoons rated highly critical of the parties, only two had a candidate featured. All of the other cartoons enjoying these high factor scores had either the symbolic icons or the name of the party prominently displayed.

The liberal/conservative continuum Q sort was highly correlated with the partisan Q sort for each, indicating that both subjects perceived the cartoons about the parties within an ideological framework. Those cartoons deemed "most critical of the GOP" were also determined to be the "most liberal," while those highly "critical of the Democrats" were also ranked more "conservative" by both subjects.

Factor Three

Humorous reactions to the cartoons by both subjects are central to factor three. The negative loading of Subject #18's Q sort regarding which cartoons she found humorous (-.83) and almost identical positive loading (at .82) of the cartoons that made her angry indicated that the cartoons she found most serious-minded made her feel anger. For example, one cartoon showed two men on board a ship (one wore a T-shirt emblazoned "Democrat" and the other's read "GOP") struggling over a life saver while in the background a man with "The Public" written over his head was apparently drowning. Subject #18 saw only "the GOP's insensitivity to the needs of the people regarding health care" reflected by their "fighting the Democrats." She went on to say how "infuriating" it was that the Republicans had prevailed on the issue of health care reform. As for the humorous cartoons, all of which lampooned Ross Perot, Subject #18 explained, "Levity is another word for humor and Perot is a lightweight if ever there were one." Because Perot was completely nonpartisan, this disdain for the man may underscore her partisan sensibilities.

Subject #1 has a unique sense of humor. This separate loading of her "humorous" sort did not approach significance on any other factor. Virtually every cartoon seemed to conform with Subject #1's sense of humor; those cartoons with the +5 "most humorous" rating seemed

completely divorced from one another in terms of the message, and shared little in the way of style. Cartoon #32 seemed to amuse her because Bush was getting the better of Clinton regarding the draft issue. For Cartoon #42 she observed, amid numerous giggles, that "Perot is riding his money like a magic carpet" while the other two candidates had to "ride their beasts". When asked why she found Cartoon #51 humorous, she simply read aloud all the buttons the donkeys were wearing and said, "I just find it funny."

Her more serious side was directly connected to economic issues. All the cartoons she selected as "most serious-minded" attacked the parties' inability to handle economic problems, underscoring her deficit-hawk proclivities. The sort representing her willingness to tell others about the cartoons also loaded significantly on this factor. Obviously, Subject #1 would tell others about cartoons that she found humorous, regardless of what else she felt or thought about them.

Conclusion

Although both subjects agreed on the partisan criticism and ideological leanings found in the cartoons, Subject #18's "opinion" Q sort loaded more heavily on the factor defining criticism of the political parties than did the same sort for Subject #1. This makes sense in light of her partisan schematic nature. Subject #1's "opinion" Q sort was less directly attached to criticism of the political parties, reflecting her nonpartisan schema. Although different cartoons were selected by each subject, Subject #18 consistently used a more ideological/partisan explanation than did Subject #1 on virtually every Q sort.

Along the emotional dimension, both subjects related their "angry" responses directly to attacks on their preferred candidates; however, their "humor" Q sorts showed profound differences. Anything that attacked Ross Perot amused Subject #18, suggesting again her partisan schema's activation. Virtually every cartoon seemed to conform with Subject #1's sense of humor; however, her more serious side was directly connected to economic issues. All the cartoons she selected as "most serious-minded" attacked the political parties' inability to handle economic problems, underscoring her greater concern with political issues than with political parties.

For those who have some degree of comic art appreciation, the political cartoonist can deliver a potent political message. Surely, there are more lessons for researchers to learn from the study of political cartoons. And employing to that end techniques demonstrated herein,

they might just enjoy a chuckle or two along the way.

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