

SOME MEANINGS OF POLITICAL CARTOONS

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Just as there is no agreement about the precise meaning of politics, there are wide differences of opinion regarding the meaning of political symbols. This is reflected in many recent Q studies of political leaders (Brown & Ellithorp, 1970), of the public mind (Cohen & Taylor, 1971), of political cartoons (Borrmann, Koester & Bennett, 1981), and of posters (Brown, 1979). The purpose of this paper is to examine what a Q factor analytic examination of political cartoons might reveal in terms of attributed meanings by 20 subjects.

Political cartoons were selected on the assumption that some respondents would have intimate concerns and knowledge about local political activities; others would have concerns with national issues during the 1980 elections; and still others would feel a proximity to international issues. $N = 60$ cartoons were administered to $n = 20$ subjects, most of whom had professional concerns with politics, but six of whom did not, and three different factors emerged from the subsequent factor analysis.¹

We did not define the political, although we struc-

tured the cartoons we found from newspapers, calendars and textbooks. The subjects did not conform to our expectation that they would differ largely in terms of international, national and local interests. They demonstrated that the political space-time varies with the perspective of the subject, hence a wider possible variation of the definition of the political.

The general theoretical framework was suggested in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

There is an easy reason, why every thing contiguous to us, either in space or time, should be conceived with a peculiar force and vivacity, and excell every other object, in its influence on the imagination. Ourselves is intimately present to us, and whatever is related to self must partake of that quality. But where an object is so far removed as to have lost the advantage of this relation, why, as it is farther removed, its idea becomes still fainter and more obscure, would, perhaps, require a more particular examination. (Hume, 1978: Bk II, #7)

Factor A: The Current Events Factor

The current moment in time and the widely publicized event appeals to respondents loading heavily on factor A. One way of illustrating this is to contrast the reactions of each factor to cartoons 27 and 28. Both cartoons deal with equal rights. However, ERA is not connected by factor A to the more ambigu-



(28)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
4	2	0	0

1. Explanation of the methodology will be found in Brown (1980). The three factors are designated A, B, and C; since factor C is bipolar, the persons who load negatively on this factor are designated for the convenience of this presentation as factor D.

FE



A Pilgrimage's Progress

(27)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
-3	-4	4	-4

ous reference to the 1914 flapper movement; cartoon 27 relates to a time and space remote to this factor's interest.

For factor A, cartoons 23 and 50, dealing with the oil crisis and the Iranian crisis, also have the necessary immediacy, as do cartoons 2 and 6 dealing with the Love Canal chemical waste horror and the Supreme Court's abortion ruling. Subjects on this factor were highly conscious of political circumstances which were well publicized and of immediate personal concern. It is

of possible significance that this factor included some members of the political science faculty, political science graduate students and a political writer for a local paper, and that with one exception they were between the ages of 23 and 40.



(23)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
-4	-2	0	0



(50)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
-4	-2	-3	3

*Factor B: Insecure Apoliticals
With Moralistic Concerns*

There were five women who were purely loaded on this factor, and their ages were between 24 and 63. Their concerns seem to have an apolitical but highly moralistic flavor. This is reflected in their highly negative response to the flapper cartoon 27 (*supra*),



(2)

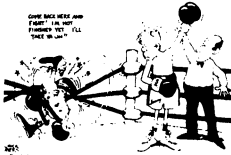
Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
4	2	0	0



(6)

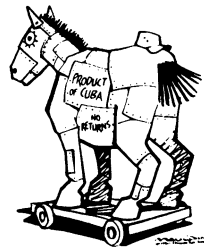
Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
4	-3	-2	2

and to their positive response to Senator Edward Kennedy's political defeats in 1980, and to their fears about the Cuban refugees (cartoons 10 and 59). Interviews with these subjects suggest that when they see the name Kennedy, they feel Chappaquidick, and that they see the Trojan horse from Cuba as a threat to jobs and safety. In addition to the moralism of individuals on this factor, one must emphasize the threats to their personal security space, and this is evident in other responses as well.



(10)

Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
0	4	-2	2



(59)

Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
-3	4	0	0

Factor C: A Theoretical Perspective

The two individuals loaded on factor C differentiate themselves from other factors in that they are

both scholars and political activists who are 52 and 57 years of age, respectively. One had a parent who was a flapper; old political conflicts such as are reflected in the flapper cartoon have an immediacy to individuals on this factor, which includes the ambiguous connotations of cartoon 10, and to whom the political cat-calls of the moment in the ERA cartoon 28 evoke no response whatever.



Local Disarmament

(55)

Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
-3	-4	4	-4



(56)

Factor Scores			
A	B	C	D
-1	-3	4	-4

The appeal of ambiguity is quite evident in their uniquely positive responses to cartoons dealing with disarmament and terrorism (cartoons 55 and 56). For this factor the present time clearly includes events of this century, and their personal space includes matters that are local, national and international. Curiously, both individuals on this factor are Quakers; whether it is their perspective that determines their religion or the reverse would be an interesting question for additional analysis.

For purposes of this report two things are significant. First, the obvious contrast in perspective between factors A and C resulting from different senses of time and space may provide a clue as to why members of the Democratic coalition have such a difficult time coming to agreement about candidates and programs. Secondly, factor C is bipolar with D.

Factor D: The Literal Perspective

Unlike factor C, the two young men (ages 22 and 23) on factor D do not appreciate ambiguity in cartoons. This is evident in their responses to cartoons 10, 55 and 56 which were demonstrated above, and to cartoons 34 and 45 as well. This group functions very much in



"First, they stole my scales, then they stole my sword"

(34)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
2	-1	-4	4



(45)

Factor Scores

A	B	C	D
-3	0	-4	4

the same time framework as factor A, but their space resembles factor B, with personal security and moralism strong. Like factor A they like the contemporary situation spelled out, but it must be explained explicitly. Like factor B their space is personally oriented, but unlike B it is charged with political connotations that must be made obvious.

Conclusions

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The meaning of cartoons is found to be also in the beholder. Consequently, a single cartoon evokes a variety of responses which are reflected in the foregoing four factors. Factor A judged cartoons in terms of whether they were relevant to the immediate political contests and for their accuracy or maliciousness. In contrast, factor B was concerned with a very personal space-time. Factor D had elements of A and B, but found itself in dramatic contrast to factor C. Factor D's first requirement for an appealing cartoon

was that its message should be simple, clear and unambiguous. The theoretical perspective of factor C insisted on ambiguous cartoons rich in connotations and expressing a longer span of history than is evident in any of the other factors.

Significantly, the responses to the cartoons did not show that any factor divided political space in the pattern of political science textbooks, that is, differentiating local from national and both from international politics. Possibly, this is a sign of good instruction; alternatively, common sense cannot be overcome by an abstract intellectual framework. Apparently, each factor has a space-time framework of its own which assists in the understanding of abstractions, such as cartoons are apt to be. Finally, there does not appear to be any common denominator for the interpretation of any cartoon except within the factors. Accordingly, each factor reflects its own conception of the political.²

Returning, then, to the cartoons and the people who were subjected to them during the period of the 1980 national conventions, we may be as in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act V, Scene 1):

Theseus: The best in this kind are but mere shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.

Hyppolyta: It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.

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2. This finding, that each factor has its own conception, coincides with the findings of a Q study of the way in which political cartoons function during an election campaign (Bormann, Koester & Bennett, 1981). The purpose of that study was to examine the link between shared fantasies in small groups and the

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sharing of media fantasies in the 1976 U.S. presidential election.

The objective-subjective categorization has equated subjective measures with measurement of perceptions. The defining of all measures of perceptions as subjective is based on a confusion over whose subjectivity is involved. The objectivity that is desired in scientific inquiry refers to objectivity on the part of the researcher. Subjective behavior on the part of those being studied, however, may be a legitimate topic of scientific inquiry.... Stated differently, subjectivity can apply to the way something is measured, or it can apply to the object being measured. (Downey & Ireland)