JLMast 02.Aug.16 Appendix AJCS-258-OAR1

Title – Action in Culture: Act I of the Presidential Primary Campaign in the U.S., April to December, 2015

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Appendix

Presidential elections are the subject of a tremendous amount of scholarly research. In effort to indicate how my study fits into the universe of election studies, I offer a broad and partial schematic of this literature. In this appendix, I describe four particularly influential orientations to the subject of presidential elections, and specify how culture is represented and positioned epistemologically in each.

The following approaches argue that economic conditions, peace and war, media influences, presidential rhetoric and communication, and demographics figure centrally in shaping politics and election outcomes. I agree that these factors are important and influential. Where my approach differs, however, is that I insist that these categories are culturally constructed.

My method is interpretive. I foreground the symbolic environment in which political actors perform specific meanings about these categories, and I specify the interpretive resources citizen audiences draw upon to make sense of these performances. Critical to my approach is insisting that when candidates name, diagnose, and prescribe plans for improving the conditions and forces that shape these factors, they do so by embedding these categories in narratives laden

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with moral meanings and ethical sentiments. Voting, I argue, is an action at which many powerful meaning formations --about citizenship, personal interests, national and personal identity, for instance-- intersect.

Bread and peace

Researchers seeking to build predictive models are explicit: they aim to specify quantifiable variables that determine election outcomes, and the fewer the variables, the better the model.

Douglas Hibbs (2012), for instance, designed a “bread and peace model” in effort to “pin down quantitatively the persistent influence of objectively measured political-economic fundamentals on aggregate votes for president” (637). He analyzed every postwar US presidential election from 1952 to 2008, and concluded that two factors, bread and peace, determined every one of these elections’ outcomes. Bread, the more determinative of the two variables, represents the “weighted-average growth of per capita real disposable personal income over the [presidential] term.” The second, less influential factor, peace, represents “cumulative US military fatalities due to unprovoked, hostile deployments of American armed forces in foreign wars” that occurred during the incumbent party’s four year mandate period. “No other outside variable systematically affects postwar aggregate votes for president,” Hibbs asserted (365).

On culture, Hibbs was explicit: it played no role in electoral outcomes. In developing his model he dispensed with “voter sentiments, preferences, and opinions” because, in his words, “[a]ttitudinal variables are endogenous: they are affected causally by objective fundamentals and consequently supply no insight into the root causes of voting behavior” (637).

Bread and peace explained the outcomes of fifteen consecutive presidential elections. Hibbs's article was published in October 2012, prior to that year's presidential election, in which incumbent Barrack Obama sought reelection against a challenge from Republican candidate, Mitt Romney. Hibbs concluded that the bread and peace model "forecast a fairly big loss by President Obama" (639) that year, an election that Obama proceeded to win in November.

Higgs's approach may appear extreme, yet many of his epistemological assumptions run deep in election studies, even if in diluted form.

Peace, prosperity and political moderation

A second cluster in the universe of election scholarship is comprised of researchers who acknowledge that broadcast media and new media technologies have reshaped how politics is practiced by elites and experienced by citizens. They recognize that many of their colleagues are increasingly attending to communicative spaces and political actors' appeals to the public. Yet scholars in this cluster argue that findings from studies of "this new political style" of "'constructing' a public discourse" (Zaller 1998: 187) are "somewhat weaker" (186) than findings from studies that privilege variables of "political substance – in the sense of peace, prosperity, and moderation" (187).

Studies that approach politics as the "attempt to govern on the basis of words and images that diffuse through the mass media" are fine, Zaller suggests, but ultimately they are missing what really shapes political processes: "The public stays focused on a bottom line consisting of peace, prosperity, and moderation," and these fundamentals "very heavily influence the

dynamics of presidential support, probably matters of presidential popularity and certainly in general elections" (186).

In this cluster, the substance variables are understood to be resistant to interpretive interference, or to forces that may obfuscate their true importance or distort their real meanings: "However poorly informed, psychologically driven, and 'mass mediated' public opinion may be, it is capable of recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters" (186). While "peace, prosperity, and political moderation" shares many of the naturalist assumptions in the "bread and peace" approach, its concerns with the origins and effects of public opinion indicate it is less epistemologically rigid than the modelling cluster.

Communication and Rhetoric

The "somewhat weaker" studies to which Zaller refers are outgrowths of Richard Neustadt's (1990 [1976]) influential study of the modern presidency and the politics of leadership. Neustadt represented mid-twentieth century state power as concentrated in Washington's corridors, where it was sequestered from press scrutiny and public purview. It was in these insulated spaces that state power was negotiated, bargained over, and ultimately translated into an agenda. Neustadt was foremost interested in presidential power, and in the constraints on it and the strategies for projecting it. He argued that multi-branch government and party politics established conditions in which executive power operated not through simple commands but through bargaining with Washington and congressional elites. Persuasion was the key to successful bargaining (or "deal making" in the parlance of the 2016 election), he observed, and direct appeals to the public could increase an incumbent's prestige and thereby his power to persuade political elites.

Conditions changed dramatically in subsequent decades, however: television and mass media penetrated the political and domestic spheres, the executive branch expanded its communications and press relations administrative arms, party hierarchies eroded, and presidents engaged directly with citizens through public addresses with greater frequency and in regard to a proliferating variety of subjects. Scholars continued to pursue Neustadt's questions, however, their depictions of the sources and means of executive power increasingly cast speaking to the public, and public opinion itself, in more robust roles.

One of the post-Neustadt responses argues that defusing forces transformed an orderly, institutionalized Washington into a fragmented arena, one comprised not of party loyalists but individualized political actors and diverse interests (Kernell 2007 [1986]). These conditions radically altered the calculus of bargaining, and made political rhetoric and the method of "going public" strategically advantageous. This response retains Neustadt's emphasis on bargaining, though it conceives of it as a much more complex site of transaction, and as occurring within a much more complex political field. It interprets instances of political rhetoric and "going public" through an economistic logic: motives for going public, the strategies and means for pursing it, and the content and style of practicing it, are all reduced to calculations of costs and benefits, and estimates of the likelihood of outcomes. Presidents speaking to publics in this approach is rhetoric practiced and interpreted by rational actors with instrumental motives and individual interests.

A second post-Neustadt response attributes the increasing centrality of public rhetoric to meaning and interpretation, and thereby represents an important step toward bringing the cultural into political analysis. The rise of the "rhetorical presidency" (Ceasar et al 1981; Tulis 1987) is rooted in twentieth century presidents' shifting interpretations of the executive role and the

doctrines that had dictated its parameters. The rise was facilitated by media technology, and lent fuel and normalized by increasingly aggressive and flamboyant approaches to campaigning for office. Meaning is important in this approach, but it is limited to presidents' and critics' interpretations of the role and duties of the office. Meaning in the analysis stops at that point, at instances in which presidents interpret their role differently. From that moment on, meaning is translated into practice, as rhetoric and speechmaking. Audiences are conceived of as so thoroughly habituated to the practice of public rhetoric that they are inured to it, or as highly rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of the proposals contained in the rhetoric vis-à-vis their own interests. Rhetoric analysis ends up returning us to metrics of effectiveness, strategy, and the force of mere expectations, and not to interpretive structures and symbolic environments.

David Ryfe (2005) interpreted Kernell's and Tulis's innovations in presidential studies as representative of a potential that had been only partially realized. More so, the rhetoric-oriented work inspired be these developments remains hamstrung by epistemological assumptions that "mischaracterize how symbols work" (10) and by a "conception of communication that casts the public as consumer of presidential information: citizens receive, cognitively process, and decide wither [sic] or not to 'buy' information conveyed by the presidents" (6), or in the case of elections, presidential candidates.

To fully realize its potential, Ryfe sets out to place presidents *in culture*. Building upon Habermas's work on the institutional conditions that facilitated the rise of a robust public sphere, and Geertz's advocacy for thick description, Ryfe covers the rise of the rhetorical presidency and the strategy of going public but in a much more culturally nuanced and ultimately illuminating way. He details how presidents thought of their own roles, and those of the press and the public,

through the dominant discourses and metaphors of their day. Without writing the word, Ryfe creates a representation of presidents *in culture* which is essentially a semiotic one. Yet leaning on Searle and Wittgenstein to represent the institutionalization and continuance of the practice of going public, Ryfe's explanation veers toward presenting culture as the mere repetition of practice, or towards a formulation of culture which is essentially an ethnomethodological one.

Demographics

Demography plays an increasingly central role in election studies as well as in political commentary and strategizing. It is a powerful signifier. It promises to represent in a pure way (read statistical) social groups' attitudes and interests and to predict their future actions. Culture plays contradictory roles in this cluster. It is alternately dismissed as being immaterial and irrelevant, or elevated to the status of being perniciously determinative. Whereas some demographers argue that cultural factors are rendered insubstantial by social forces that clarify real interests, others use its findings to blame culture for obscuring or concealing real interests. While culture's effects are interpreted in these opposing ways, representatives of both orientations share a few assumptions. Building their arguments upon a materialism that often remains implicit, they routinely conceptualize culture as representing a force that stands outside of and exists external to the social actor (cf Alexander 1988). They also conceive of the rational dimensions of social action in exaggerated and excessive terms; their social actors are either singularly rational or tragically irrational.

Sociologists Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks (1998), for instance, seek to identify the factors that gave rise to and sustain the gender gap in US presidential elections, and they claim

that their findings explain American women's increasing propensity to vote Democratic relative to the men's vote. They conclude that "a single causal process" (1249), namely increased women's participation in the labor force, has caused "a cumulative net shift among women toward support for Democratic presidential candidates" (1259).

Cultural factors are rarely mentioned. When they appear, they play either an anecdotal role, or, in the form of attitudes, they are dismissed for failing to meet the standards of statistical significance. The one attitudinal variable that does register significance, support for social services spending, is in fact a product of the causal variable, that of labor force participation, the authors explain (1255-56). While they rely on phrases such as "the Democratic Party has stood for" (1240), or "the Republican Party has… been viewed by many voters as," they fail to discuss any means by which these meanings and interpretive frameworks may have formed. They dismiss political campaigns and press commentary as thin solutes disappearing in the universal solvent that is real interests:

> "The increasing importance of work on gender-based political divisions has not been systematically understood by previous scholarly or journalistic analysts. Even when political commentators have referred to work related factors among women, they have failed to grasp their political significance. For instance, a *Time* cover story (October 14, 1996), appearing during the final weeks of the 1996 campaign, suggested that 'Bob Dole and Bill Clinton will do anything to win the hearts and votes of working moms, but many of them are too busy to notice.' To the contrary, it appears that working women have noticed and are choosing accordingly" (1262).

Labor force experience explains ideas, attitudes, and voting actions, the authors contend, while communicative and performance strategies are transparent epiphenomena, easily dismissed.

The alternative version of culture is seen in pieces like social critic Thomas Frank's best seller, *What's the Matter With Kansas* (2004), as well as in many of the scholarly responses it generated (e.g. Bartels 2006; c.f. Willett 2008). Seeking to explain why the white working class consistently votes against its real, material interests, Frank builds an equation akin to: Machiavelli plus false consciousness equals manufactured consent. Culture is conceived as values. As an arena of values, it is organized along class lines, with lower and middle class whites embracing values strictly opposed to those found on the nation's coasts and that are held by media, limousine liberal, and technocratic elites.

As a demographic, the white working class played an important role in shaping Hillary Clinton's electoral strategy. Courting the demographic helped lift candidate Bill Clinton into office in the 1990s. Candidate Obama, on the contrary, pursued support from young voters, non-whites, and women. The strategy was so successful that it gave rise to the most powerful demographic symbol operating in the political universe currently, that of the "Obama coalition." The question that animates much discussion amongst the current election's commentators and handwringing amongst its strategists is if the coalition is transferable (Haberman and Martin 2015; Galston 2015). The Clinton campaign will soon find out.

In my analysis of the first act of the 2016 presidential election, I start from the premise that people's understandings and experiences of the economy, peace and violence, and identity are assemblages of cultural narratives, discourses, and symbolic codes. My approach is intended to demonstrate that these factors, which appear to present themselves naturally to voters, like photographs, are in fact highly constructed. My argument is that through investigating cultural structures and performances of meaning, we can begin to understand how people make personal choices about what they believe are the right and wrong ways for the nation to move forward,

about who they believe has the proper character for representing and leading the country, and about which policies they believe will be good and which will be bad for protecting and advancing their own personal interests. Building on the works of Geertz, Barthes, and Alexander, my argument is that through investigating durable meaning structures we can begin to understand how in periods of economic expansion and domestic and international peace, for instance, narratives of financial, personal, familial and social threat and vulnerability may still find purchase. My point is that between indicators and understandings circulate meanings, and that performances are particularly potent events during which these meanings are condensed, communicated, and interpreted.

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