Ambiguity in the Issue Positions of Presidential Candidates: A Causal Analysis*

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This study investigated the causes of ambiguity in the issue positions of presidential candidates from 1968 to 1980. Three potential causes suggested by the research of Shepsle (1972) and Page (1976, 1978) were examined: issue salience, opinion dispersion, and issue proximity. Salience was found not to have a direct effect on ambiguity, but a slight, negative indirect effect. Opinion dispersion had a significant positive effect, and proximity had about an equally strong negative direct effect on ambiguity.

> *Let me make one thing perfectly clear.*
> —*Richard Nixon*

Candidates are commonly criticized for taking ambiguous positions on the issues. Page (1978, p. 152) goes so far as to say that "the most striking feature of candidates' rhetoric about policy is its extreme vagueness." The purpose of this paper is to report an exploration of the causes of this ambiguity.

In the past decade two theories have been offered to explain ambiguity in the candidates' positions. Both of these theories have their roots in the Downsian tradition (Downs, 1957, chs. 7 and 8). The first theory was offered by Shepsle (1972). Shepsle formulated a lottery theory or what might be called a strategic theory of ambiguity. According to this theory, ambiguity is a result of an intentional strategy of candidates facing a risk-acceptant public. Or, to put it more simply, candidates are ambiguous to avoid offending voters.

The second theory was offered by Page (1976, 1978). Page developed an emphasis allocation theory of ambiguity. This theory holds that ambiguity is a result of the limited "number of messages that candidates can transmit or that the average voter can or will receive." From this viewpoint, ambiguity is the consequence of an unintentional and perhaps unavoidable communication problem. Candidates have limited resources

to devote to articulating their issue positions, and voters have limited re-
sources to devote to understanding those positions.

This study examined three explanatory variables suggested by the re-
search of Shepsle and Page. The explanatory variables are issue salience,
the proximity of a candidate's position to the median position in the elec-
torate, and the dispersion of public opinion on the issue. First, issue sali-
ence may influence the level of ambiguity in a candidate's stand. If Shep-
sle's theory is right, we might expect candidates to be most ambiguous on
the most salient issues inasmuch as these are potentially the most damag-
ing issues. If Page's theory is right, we might expect the opposite. Candi-
dates should be least ambiguous on the most salient issues because these
issues deserve the greater allocation of emphasis. Second, the proximity
of a candidate to the public's median issue position may affect ambiguity.
The closer the candidate is to the public's view, the less he has to fear
from holding a clear position. Third, if the public's opinion on an issue
is dispersed, the candidate may be more ambiguous in order to cover
more of the issue spectrum. As Page (1976, p. 749) has noted, "Obvi-
ously the candidate's best strategy is to avoid issues of a divisive sort,
and place (as nearly as possible) *no* emphasis on them, but devote all his
time, money, and energy to matters of consensus."

Data and Methods

The data used to examine the causes of ambiguity come from the
Center for Political Studies presidential election studies of 1968, 1972,
1976, and 1980. Twenty-six issues were examined in these four national
surveys. Respondents were asked to place themselves and the candidates
on a seven-point scale for each issue. This permits an examination of 52
issue positions (26 issues and two candidate positions per issue). Table 1
presents a brief description of each issue, the election year in which it
was measured, the candidates whose positions will be analyzed, and
values of each variable to be examined.

The principal variable in this analysis—the ambiguity of the candi-
dates' issue positions—is estimated as the standard deviation of the pub-
lic's perception of the candidate's position. If the distribution of citizen
perceptions of the candidate's position is widely dispersed, the candidate's
position is assumed to be ambiguous. A few voters may be uncertain
about a clear position of a candidate, but if many differ in their under-
standing of that position (as reflected in a large standard deviation), we
may reasonably challenge the clarity of the candidate's position. The am-
biguity measure ranged from a value of 1.28 on McGovern's position on
the Vietnam War in 1972 to 1.94 for Ford's position on busing in the
1976 campaign.

TABLE 1

Issues Included in the Analysis

Election	Subject of Issue	Candidates	Issue Salience	Opinion Dispersion	Proximity to Democrat	Proximity to Republican	Ambiguity of Democrat	Ambiguity of Republican
1968	Urban unrest	Humphrey/Nixon	46	1.95	1.22	0.36	1.54	1.61
1968	Vietnam War	Humphrey/Nixon	70	1.98	0.06	0.29	1.54	1.50
1972	Vietnam War	McGovern/Nixon	19	1.90	2.41	0.88	1.28	1.60
1972	Inflation	McGovern/Nixon	10	1.48	0.80	1.01	1.67	1.60
1972	Jobs	McGovern/Nixon	8	1.97	2.03	0.18	1.68	1.72
1972	Rights of accused	McGovern/Nixon	5	2.12	1.33	0.00	1.67	1.73
1972	Minority groups	McGovern/Nixon	8	1.97	1.82	0.09	1.51	1.55
1972	Taxes	McGovern/Nixon	3	2.29	0.89	0.56	1.89	1.76
1972	Urban unrest	McGovern/Nixon	5	2.09	0.20	1.35	1.59	1.77
1972	Campus unrest	McGovern/Nixon	0	1.86	1.75	0.03	1.71	1.38
1976	Rights of accused	Carter/Ford	0	2.12	0.80	0.61	1.65	1.77
1976	Busing	Carter/Ford	1	1.69	2.85	2.64	1.79	1.94
1976	Minority groups	Carter/Ford	2	1.98	1.16	0.32	1.53	1.62
1976	Health insurance	Carter/Ford	1	2.37	1.18	0.57	1.58	1.72
1976	Jobs	Carter/Ford	46	1.70	1.55	0.14	1.55	1.48
1976	Urban unrest	Carter/Ford	0	1.91	0.25	0.83	1.46	1.50

TABLE 1 — Continued

1976	Marijuana	1	2.17	1.05	0.94	1.50	1.48
1976	Taxes	6	2.25	0.86	0.25	1.70	1.59
1976	Women's rights	0	2.07	0.20	0.49	1.51	1.56
1980	Inflation	72	1.49	0.27	0.44	1.47	1.36
1980	Defense spending	18	1.50	1.67	0.40	1.47	1.50
1980	Government spending	10	1.89	0.78	1.00	1.35	1.52
1980	Jobs	26	1.88	1.29	0.61	1.41	1.49
1980	Russian relations	3	1.83	1.45	0.70	1.47	1.54
1980	Minority groups	1	1.59	1.45	0.55	1.41	1.29
1980	Women's rights	0	1.93	0.27	2.03	1.42	1.88

NOTE: The issue salience measure is a percentage. The opinion dispersion and ambiguity measures are in terms of standard deviations. The proximity measures reported here are the difference between the median public position and median perception of the candidates' positions. The proximity scores used in this analysis are the negatives of those distances.

There are a variety of reasons to measure ambiguity by the voters' perceptions rather than simply the candidates' statements. First, there are many problems with evaluating the clarity or ambiguity of candidate pronouncements. As Page has noted, candidates can send ambiguous messages in a variety of ways. Besides the conventional approach of covering issue positions with a pile of prose, candidates can create ambiguity by deemphasizing issues, excessively qualifying statements, presenting positions that appear contradictory to voters, and perhaps even explaining issue positions in excessive detail. Second, even if the ambiguity of candidate statements could be accurately gauged, ambiguity may arise from the candidates' past and present behavior. Voters watch what candidates do as well as listen to what they say. Differences between what candidates do and what they say may be a significant source of ambiguity. Finally, if we are to claim a position to be clear or ambiguous, we must identify to whom is it clear or ambiguous. Since we are concerned essentially with a communications process, the audience (in this case, the electorate) may be the best judge of clarity or ambiguity.[1] Following a similar line of reasoning, Carmines and Gopoian (1981, p. 1179) have recently argued that "the ambiguity or clarity of a message is as much dependent on the listener as the speaker."

In addition to the ambiguity variable, the analysis included a set of three variables that may affect ambiguity. These include issue salience, the dispersion of public opinion, and the proximity of the candidate to the public's opinion on the issue. Issue salience was measured by responses to open-ended questions asking respondents to identify the most important problems facing the nation.[2] Salience ranged from a high of 72

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[1] It may be rightly argued that biases in the electorate could distort the clarity or ambiguity of the candidates' positions. However, one test for these biases indicated that they were minimal. Measures of ambiguity (using the standard deviation of perceptions of the candidates' positions) were obtained for both supporters of Democratic and Republican candidates (support determined by differences on thermometer scales). The measures for both groups of supporters were then averaged so that the views of one set of supporters (who might be biased in one direction) would be weighed equally with others (who might be biased in the opposite direction). The correlation between this averaged measure of ambiguity and the measure used in this study is .92. There was even a strong positive correlation between perceptions of followers and opponents of the candidates (.55) and a median absolute difference of ambiguity score of only .12. Another source of measurement error may be the extremeness of positions on the seven-point scale. Beliefs about extreme positions may have smaller standard deviations (i.e., appear less ambiguous) than moderate positions as an artifact of the scale being closed ended. In fact, a correlation of .42 was observed between issue moderation and ambiguity. Although this may indicate systematic measurement error, it more probably indicates a true empirical relationship between the clarity and extremeness of issue positions.

[2] The percentage of respondents mentioning each issue and the SRC/CPS code used to identify a mention of each issue follows: urban unrest '68 (46 percent) 50, 60, 360, 364; Vietnam '68 (70 percent) 500, 530, 580; Vietnam '72 (19 percent) 500, 530, 580; inflation

percent on inflation in 1980 to a low of zero on five separate occasions. The dispersion of public opinion on an issue is measured as the standard deviation of the voter's own attitudes on the issue. Dispersion ranged from a high of 2.37 on national health insurance in 1976 to a low of 1.48 inflation in 1972. Proximity of the candidates to the public was measured as the negative of the absolute difference between the median perception of the candidate's position and the median of the voters' issue positions. Proximity to the public's position ranged from perfect correspondence with Nixon's stand on rights of the accused in 1972 to a 2.85 difference with Carter's stand on busing in the 1976 election.

Causes of Issue Ambiguity

Three possible causes of ambiguity—issue salience, the dispersion of public opinion, and the proximity of candidates to the public's median issue stand—are examined using an ordinary least squares regression analysis of Equation 1 below:

$$\text{Ambiguity} = b_1 \text{ Salience} + b_2 \text{ Dispersion} + b_3 \text{ Proximity} + e \qquad (1)$$

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2.

Proximity has a significant negative direct effect on issue ambiguity, as indicated by its -.31 beta coefficient (Table 2). When they are distant from the center of public opinion, candidates take ambiguous positions to reduce the public disaffection that might result from the differences in policy preferences. When the positions of candidates and the public are highly congruent, candidates apparently feel less of a need to obscure their positions. For instance, in 1972 Nixon could afford to be very clear about his position on campus unrest (a standard deviation of 1.38) because his perceived position was nearly identical to that of the typical citizen (a difference of .03).

Issue salience, according to the coefficients reported in Table 2, has no direct effect on the ambiguity of the candidates' issue positions.

'72 (10 percent) 400, 403, 405; jobs '72 (8 percent) 10, 420; rights of the accused '72 (5 percent) 350, 366; minority groups '72 (8 percent) 62, 63, 300, 303, 310, 340; taxes '72 (3 percent) 411; urban unrest '72 (5 percent) 50, 60, 360, 364; campus unrest '72 (0 percent) 359, 362; rights of the accused '76 (0 percent) 344, 350, 351, 352; busing '76 (1 percent) 310, 311, 312; minority groups '76 (2 percent) 63, 64, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304; national health insurance '76 (1 percent) 40, 41, 42; jobs '76 (46 percent) 10, 11, 12, 19; urban unrest '76 (0 percent) 54, 55, 56, 59; marijuana '76 (1 percent) 320, 321, 322, 329; taxes '76 (6 percent) 416, 417, 418; women's rights '76 (0 percent) 330, 331, 332, 339; inflation '80 (72 percent) 400, 403, 404; defense spending '80 (18 percent) 700, 711, 712, 713, 719; government spending '80 (10 percent) 90, 91, 92, 414, 415; jobs '80 (26 percent) 10, 11, 12, 19; Russia '80 (3 percent) 530, 531, 532, 533; minority groups '80 (1 percent) 300, 301; women's rights '80 (0 percent) 330, 331.

TABLE 2

The Causes of Issue Ambiguity

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: Ambiguity	
	Simple r	Beta
Salience	−.25	−.04
Dispersion	.36	.39**
Proximity	−.26	−.31*

$R^2 = .23$
*$p < .05$
*$p < .01$

Looking solely at the simple bivariate relationship between salience and ambiguity, it would appear that issue salience causes candidates to reduce the ambiguity of their positions ($r = -.25$). Candidates communicate their positions most clearly to the voters when voters express some concern about the issue. As has already been noted, this might be expected by Page's emphasis allocation theory and would be counter to Shepsle's strategic theory. However, when issue salience is set in its multivariate context, its direct effects disappear.

There are several possible interpretations for the insignificance of direct salience effects on ambiguity. The first is that the emphasis-allocation reasons for being more ambiguous on the *unimportant* issues are offset by the strategic reasons for being more ambiguous on the *important* issues. The second interpretation is that issue salience indirectly affects ambiguity. If Figure 1 is properly specified, it indicates that issue salience has an indirect effect of -.10 on issue ambiguity. Issue salience causes candidates to move closer to the median position of the public. This greater proximity, in turn, reduces the candidates' fear of voter disaffection thus allowing them to clarify their positions.

The third explanatory variable, opinion dispersion, has a significant positive direct effect (.39) on issue ambiguity. When public opinion is spread across the spectrum, candidate issue positions, as expected, are particularly ambiguous. In an effort to minimize ill will, candidates attempt through ambiguity to stretch their issue stands to cover the broadest possible segment of the issue dimension. An example is Nixon's position on taxes in 1972 in which the public was fairly dispersed in opinion (standard deviation of 2.29) and Nixon was ambiguous (standard deviation of 1.89). However, as Figure 1 indicates, candidates also attempt to minimize ill will on issues with dispersed public opinion by seeking the
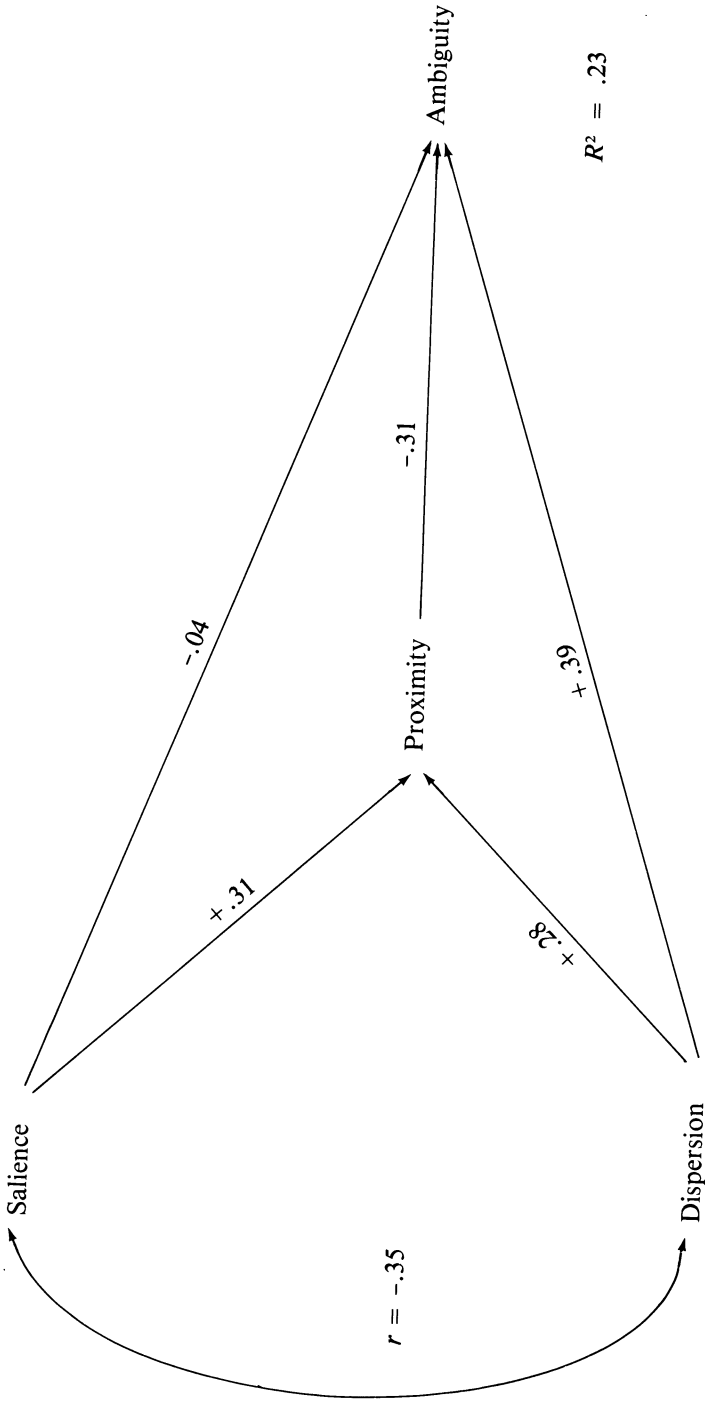
FIGURE 1

A Causal Model of Issue Ambiguity

middle ground. This greater proximity, as we have seen, affords candidates an opportunity to reduce the ambiguity of their issue positions. This negative indirect effect (dispersion-to-proximity-to-ambiguity) of −.09 partially offsets the positive direct effect and leaves dispersion with a net positive effect of .30 on ambiguity, about the same as the impact of proximity.[3]

Discussion

At the outset of this article, Page's emphasis allocation theory of ambiguity and Shepsle's lottery theory of ambiguity were briefly presented. The findings of this analysis neither entirely confirm nor disconfirm these theories. The negative effect of proximity and the positive effect of dispersion on ambiguity could be traced to either the lottery/strategic theory or the emphasis allocation theory. The negligible direct effect of salience on ambiguity was not suggested by either theory. This may mean that both theories are incorrect, but more probably indicates that both are valid and offset each other's effects.

This analysis has examined only the causes of ambiguity in candidate positions. An obviously related set of questions concerns the consequences of ambiguity in general and ambiguity on particular types of issues for the public and for candidates. Ambiguity's consequences for both the quality of the electorate's decision making and the candidates' electoral fortunes await further inquiry.

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[3] Besides issue salience, issue proximity and the dispersion of public opinion, it is possible that ambiguity may vary from one candidate to another. Because of personality differences or differences in political circumstances, some candidates may be more evasive or ambiguous about their positions than other candidates. Although there may be some truth in this supposition, the mean levels of ambiguity for the candidates examined in this study varied very little. The range extended from the high mean standard deviation of 1.64 for Nixon in 1972 to the low mean standard deviation of 1.42 for Carter in 1980. Along this same line, there was virtually no difference in the ambiguity of incumbent and nonincumbent candidates.

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