Pre- to Postelection Shifts in Presidential Rhetoric: Impression Management or Cognitive Adjustment?

Philip E. Tetlock
University of California, Berkeley

This study employed content analysis to assess the conceptual or integrative complexity of pre- and postelection policy statements of 20th century American presidents. Two hypotheses were tested. According to the impression management hypothesis, presidents present issues in deliberately simplistic ways during election campaigns but in more complex ways upon assuming office when they face the necessity of justifying sometimes unpopular decisions to skeptical constituencies. According to the cognitive adjustment hypothesis, presidents gradually become more complex in their thinking during their tenure in office as they become increasingly familiar with high-level policy issues. The results strongly supported the impression management, but not the cognitive adjustment, position. The complexity of presidential policy statements increased sharply immediately after inauguration but did not increase with length of time in office. Complexity of presidential policy statements also significantly declined in reelection years.

Many political commentators have observed that it is no simple matter to predict how prospective leaders will act once they come to power. Upon the triumph of their cause, seemingly fanatical revolutionaries sometimes become pragmatic and flexible statesmen (cf. Brinton, 1938; Hoffer, 1958; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). Moreover, seasoned observers of politics in democratic states have long ceased to be surprised by the failure of victorious candidates to fulfill their campaign promises to the electorate (Graber, 1976). For instance, in 1916 Woodrow Wilson campaigned on the slogan "He kept us out of war" only to declare war on Germany the next year; in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt committed himself to balancing the budget only to create enormous deficits to finance federal programs during the Depression.

There are at least two possible explanations for the apparent inconsistencies. One view, the impression management explanation, maintains that politicians never intend to fulfill most of the public promises that they make prior to assuming office. From this standpoint, politicians are expert symbol manipulators who are prepared to say whatever they believe will attract popular support for their cause (e.g., Graber, 1976). To attract this support, politicians make sweeping generalizations and claims that they themselves recognize as far too crude and simplistic to guide actual policy making.

A second view, the cognitive adjustment explanation, portrays politicians in a less Machiavellian light. According to this view, politicians often believe the claims and promises that they make prior to assuming office, even though they later cease to support these earlier positions. They change positions because the practical demands of their new administrative responsibilities force them to modify old beliefs and to perceive issues in more complex ways (Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). Government leaders (much more than aspirants to power) must respond

flexibly to a wide range of domestic and international events, must perceive similarities and differences among various shades of opinion, and must compromise with or integrate opposing interests. As Katz (1973, p. 214) writes:

The qualities necessary for leadership at the top levels of complex organizations are heavily conceptual and intellectual. The political system, mediating the demands of other systems, calls for cognitive skills of a higher order.

Katz and Kahn (1966, p. 313) use the term *system perspective* to describe these higher-order cognitive skills. System perspective refers to the ability of a leader "to see, conceptualize, appraise, predict, and understand the demands and opportunities posed to the organization by its environment." According to the cognitive adjustment explanation, leaders gradually develop system perspective as a result of their increased familiarity with the complex tasks associated with their central decision-making roles.

These two explanations lead to different predictions. The impression management explanation implies that once a political leader gains control of the government, he or she will quickly shy away from the rigid, black-and-white generalizations that were effective in winning popular support. This is not to suggest that the leader will blatantly abandon past commitments; the public pressures for consistency are too intense to risk complete about-faces (cf. Graber, 1976; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). It does suggest, however, that the leader will present issues and policy alternatives in a more even-handed, less simplistic manner after coming to power. Occupants of key governmental roles are confronted daily with painful choices in which conflicting objectives must be acknowledged and integrated. Difficult value trade-offs can no longer be denied; they must be made and explained to often skeptical and unenthusiastic audiences. According to the impression management explanation, politicians understand these constraints and demands of office, and on assuming power they rapidly adopt more flexible and complex policy positions.

In contrast, the cognitive adjustment explanation implies a much more gradual and genuine change in policy perspective. New-

comers need time to learn to see issues in more complex ways (sometimes they are too slow to learn, with serious consequences— Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). Although the exact parameters of the learning curve are obviously difficult to specify, the process may well span a period of several months or even years (cf. Buchanan, 1978).

The present study examines the validity of the impression management and cognitive adjustment explanations in the context of 20th century American presidents. In particular, the study addresses the following key questions:

1. Are the postelection policy statements of presidents more complex than their preelection statements?

2. If there is a significant increase in complexity, is it a sudden or a gradual one? A rapid increase in complexity immediately upon assuming office would suggest that the change reflects a self-conscious political strategy. A more gradual, sustained increase in complexity would suggest that cognitive restructuring is occurring as a result of exposure to new role demands.

To answer these questions, this study used the integrative complexity coding system (Schroder, 1971; Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967) to analyze pre- and postelection policy statements of presidents. The coding rules for assessing integrative complexity were originally developed for scoring responses to a semiprojective test designed to measure individual differences in this characteristic (the Paragraph Completion Test). The major focus of integrative complexity theory is on the cognitive differentiation and integration of information. Individuals who function at the simple end of the complexity continuum are characterized by rigid value-laden interpretations of events, intolerance of cognitive inconsistency, and a tendency to make decisions on the basis of a few salient items of information. Integratively complex individuals are characterized by flexible and multidimensional cognitive systems, an openness to new information, and a tendency to integrate a variety of evidence in making decisions (Schroder, 1971). Recent research has, however, moved away from the trait conception of integrative complexity (Streufert & Streufert, 1978). Sev-

eral studies indicate that the coding system is also sensitive to situational determinants of the complexity of information processing (stress, role demands, group pressures) and, of special interest here, can be usefully applied to such archival documents as letters, essays, speeches, and diplomatic communications (Levi & Tetlock, 1980; Porter & Suedfeld, 1981; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976; Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Ramirez, 1977; Tetlock, 1979). For more details on the coding system, see the Method section.

If the impression management explanation is correct, one would expect a relatively rapid increase in the integrative complexity of presidential policy statements from the pre- to the postelection periods and a relatively rapid decrease in the integrative complexity of policy statements of presidents running for reelection. If the cognitive adjustment explanation is correct, one would expect a much more gradual increase in the integrative complexity of postelection policy statements—an increase that emerges only after the incumbent has been fully exposed to the complex role demands of the presidency.

Method

Records of pre- and postelection statements by 20th century American presidents provided data for the current study. The first step was to collect as large a number of statements as possible for each president in the following four time periods; preelection (between 5 months prior to the election and the election), the 1st month of the president's tenure in office, and the 2nd and 3rd years of the president's tenure in office. In addition, we collected statements from the reelection campaign speeches of each president who sought to keep office. We obtained statements from a variety of sources, including the *Collected Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Vital Speeches,* the *New York Times* and various historical anthologies. From the material thus compiled, we randomly selected (whenever possible) 10 paragraphs for each president in each time period. To be included in our final sample, a paragraph had to meet a minimum length requirement (50 words) and deal with an issue of political policy (a few statements that simply described personal events such as vacations were excluded). A check revealed no significant differences in the number of words in paragraphs sampled from different periods. Verbosity was thus not a confounding variable.

Presidents who came to office via the vice-presidency complicated our attempt to distinguish the impression management and the cognitive adjustment explanations (since these individuals had an opportunity "to learn on the job" prior to rather than after running for election). Five presidents (all of whom subsequently ran for elec-

tion) fell into this category; T. Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, Johnson, and Ford. Only one of these individuals (Ford) failed to retain office. We decided to sample statements from T. Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, and Johnson in the same way as we sampled statements from directly elected presidents, but to perform separate statistical analyses including and excluding these individuals. We also analyzed additional data from statements that these presidents made in the next-to-last years of their initial terms in office (except Johnson, who came to the presidency within a year of the 1964 election). This latter set of data was obtained to determine whether presidents' election campaign speeches represented a downward shift in complexity from the levels that they had exhibited earlier in their terms of office.

Integrative Complexity Coding

All material was coded for integrative complexity on a 7-point scale (see Schroder et al., 1967, Appendix 2, for a detailed discussion of the coding rules). The scale defines complexity in terms of two cognitive structural properties: differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the number of characteristics or dimensions of a problem that are taken into account in decision making. For instance, a decision maker might analyze policy issues in an undifferentiated manner by placing policy options into one of two value-laden categories: the "good, patriotic policies" and the "bad, defeatist policies". A more differentiated approach would recognize that different policies can have multiple, sometimes contradictory effects that cannot be easily classified on a single evaluative dimension—for example, effects on the military balance of power, the strategies of one's allies, nonaligned states and opponents, various sectors of the domestic economy, and various domestic political constituencies. Integration refers to the development of complex connections among differentiated characteristics. (Differentiation is thus a prerequisite for integration.) The complexity of integration depends on whether decision makers perceive the differentiated characteristics as operating in isolation (low integration); in first order or simple interactions (moderate integration); or in multiple, contingent patterns (high integration).

Scores of 1 reflect low differentiation and low integration. A hypothetical example follows:

> The country faces a great crisis that threatens us all and requires decisive action. Constantly rising inflation rates are eroding the economic security of our people, yet our government leaders seem impotent in the face of this threat. What shall we do? There is clearly only one solution to this critical problem: immediate drastic cuts in government expenditures.

Scores of 3 reflect moderate or high differentiation and low integration. A hypothetical example follows:

> The country faces serious economic problems; high inflation and high unemployment. To control inflation, we need major cuts in government spending; to reduce unemployment, we need to encourage new investment.

Scores of 5 reflect moderate or high differentiation and moderate integration. A hypothetical example follows:

The country faces two interrelated economic problems; high inflation and high unemployment. We confront a painful trade-off here. To reduce inflation, we need to reduce economic growth, thus risking greater unemployment. To reduce unemployment, we need to stimulate the economy, thus risking greater inflation.

Scores of 7 reflect high differentiation and high integration. A hypothetical example follows:

The country faces both high unemployment and high inflation rates. To decrease government spending or increase taxes in an attack on inflation will exacerbate unemployment, unless we combine a tough anti-inflationary policy with efforts to increase productivity and end regulatory excess. This combined policy will curb inflation and boost economic growth, thus increasing demand and creating new jobs.

Scores of 2, 4 and 6 represent transition points between adjacent levels. It should be noted that the complexity coding system focuses on the cognitive structure, not the content, of expressed beliefs and is not biased for or against any particular political philosophy (cf. Suedfeld & Rank, 1976). It is no more difficult to be integratively complex about the necessity for public control of key industries than about the necessity for a completely laissez-faire economic system.

Statements were coded for integrative complexity by two trained scorers who were unaware of the hypotheses and (to the extent possible) the sources of the material. Reasonably high agreement existed between coders ($r = .86$). Disagreements were resolved by discussion between coders.

Results

To distinguish the impression management and cognitive adjustment explanations, we subjected the integrative complexity scores of presidents to a repeated measures analysis of variance, with the independent variables being time period (preelection, first month of office, 2nd and 3rd years of office) and random ordering of the paragraph units sampled from statements in each time period. Our initial analysis included only those 20th century presidents who first gained the office by campaigning successfully for it. Table 1 presents the mean integrative complexity scores of these 10 presidents. The results were clear-cut. There was a strong effect for time period, $F(3, 27) = 8.15$, $p < .01$. As predicted by the impression management hypothesis, presidents' preelection statements ($M = 2.5$) were significantly less complex than their early postelection statements ($M = 3.2$), $F(1, 27) = 14.48$, $p < .001$. The prediction of the cognitive adjust-

Table 1
Mean Integrative Complexity of Presidents

President	Pre-election	1st Month	2nd Year	3rd Year
McKinley	2.1	3.1	3.1	3.2
Taft	2.4	3.5	3.5	4.1
Wilson	3.2	3.9	3.6	3.8
Harding	2.2	2.5	2.0	2.1
Hoover	3.8	2.8	2.7	3.0
F. D. Roosevelt	2.2	3.5	3.8	3.5
Eisenhower	1.9	3.4	3.4	3.8
Kennedy	2.1	3.6	3.5	4.0
Nixon	2.5	2.9	3.1	2.9
Carter	2.7	3.1	3.1	3.4

Note. This table only includes presidents who first gained office by election. Scores are on a 1–7 scale with higher scores indicating greater complexity.

ment position received virtually no support. There was no linear trend for presidential complexity scores to increase from the 1st to the 2nd to the 3rd years in office, $F(1, 27) < 1$, *ns*. Moreover, as Table 1 reveals, the absence of any overall trend is not attributable to large individual differences among presidents. For instance, it is not the case that some presidents show a strong tendency to become more complex over time, whereas others show the reverse trend.[1]

The above conclusions are not altered when one performs the same analysis of variance including those presidents who came to the office via the vice-presidency and subsequently won election to the office (T. Roosevelt, Coolidge, Truman, and Johnson). Again, there was a significant effect for time period, $F(3, 39) = 13.07$, $p < .001$. In accord with the impression management position, policy statements during the preelection pe-

---

[1] One could argue that the independent variables of time period and (perhaps especially) paragraph sampling unit should be conceptualized as random, not fixed effects and that therefore (more conservative) quasi-F ratios should be constructed to test the significance of these effects (cf. Clark, 1973; Winer, 1971). For clarity of exposition, we decided to rely on the conventional F test. We did, however, construct quasi-F ratios under two different sets of assumptions; treating both time period and paragraph sampling unit as random effects and treating time period as a fixed effect and sampling unit as a random effect. The results of these analyses were not substantially different from the ordinary F tests. Preelection statements were still significantly less complex than postelection statements.

riod were significantly less complex than were policy statements during the early post-election period, $F(1, 39) = 25.39, p < .001$. There was, however, no linear trend for presidential complexity scores to increase with length of time in office after election, $F(1, 39) < 1$.

It was also possible to test the impression management hypothesis in another way. If political impression management concerns lead presidents to present issues in simplistic ways, then the statements of presidents running for reelection should decline in complexity between the next-to-last and last years of their terms in office. To test this hypothesis, we performed a repeated measures analysis of variance on integrative complexity scores in these years. (Only presidents who decided to run for reelection were included in the analysis.)[2] The results strongly supported the impression management prediction: The complexity of presidents' policy statements fell significantly between the next-to-last and last years of terms in office, $Ms = 3.1$ and 2.4, respectively, $F(1, 12) = 18.7, p < .01$.[3]

Discussion

The results were highly consistent with the impression management hypothesis. Not only did presidents' statements rapidly increase in complexity from the pre- to postelection periods, they sharply decreased in complexity as the time for running for reelection approached.

The cognitive adjustment hypothesis fared poorly. There are three reasons, however, why it may be premature to abandon this hypothesis. First, the present study does not decisively distinguish the cognitive adjustment and impression management interpretations. The tendency for presidents' statements to increase in complexity from the pre- to postelection periods may partly reflect real cognitive changes that occur between election day and inauguration day. Presidents-elect generally spend this interim period preparing to assume office (making cabinet appointments, outlining policy objectives and strategies). Engaging in these critical pre-administration activities may result in increased appreciation of the com-

plexities of government. It is interesting from this standpoint, however, that so much cognitive change should occur in the relatively brief transition period and so little in the subsequent three years. Analyses of statements of presidents-elect would shed light on this possibility. (Of course, to the extent the cognitive adjustment position allows for substantial learning over extremely brief periods, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from the impression management position.)

Second, one could argue that presidents really do become more complex in their thinking over time but that the measures used in this study were not sufficiently sensitive to detect this increased sophistication. In particular, a defender of the cognitive adjustment position might point to the possibility that presidents were thinking about issues in substantially more complex ways than they cared to reveal to the public. Future research should address this possibility by assessing the complexity of both privately and publicly expressed views.

Third, one could argue that the cognitive adjustment hypothesis is valid, but only for certain political figures. It may not apply, for instance, to figures who have had high-level political experience prior to gaining the presidency (since such individuals presumably already appreciate many of the difficulties associated with being in power). The hypothesis may also not apply to certain character types—for example, to Barber's (1977) "passive" presidents (who invest little effort in their work) or to "active–negative" presidents (who tend to become rigidly defensive in the face of criticism). This line of argument directs us to look for individual differences in the propensity to learn from experience. Although such individual differences were not pronounced in

---

[2] Presidents included in the analysis were McKinley, T. Roosevelt (only the 1904 campaign), Taft, Wilson, Coolidge, Hoover, F. D. Roosevelt (the 1936, 1940, and 1944 campaigns), Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Ford.

[3] Quasi-F ratios were also constructed to test this effect (treating both time period and paragraph sampling unit as random effects, or treating time period as a fixed and sampling unit as a random effect). The downward shift in complexity remained significant in both cases.

our data, they may emerge in larger samples of political leaders.

Finally, it is worth considering some of the more general issues raised by the current findings. One question concerns why 20th century American political leaders have felt it useful to present issues in especially simplistic terms during elections. Is this typical of democratic politics in other countries and in other historical periods? Another question concerns whether the integrative complexity of presidents is a good predictor of "effective leadership" (however that ambiguous term might be defined). Katz and Kahn's (1966) analysis of the importance of system perspective suggests that integratively complex leaders are more likely to cope successfully with the demands of high-level political roles. How this hypothesis might be tested is an intriguing challenge for future empirical work.

References

Barber, J. D. The presidential character. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

Brinton, C. The anatomy of revolution. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1938.

Buchanan, B. The presidential experience: What the office does to the man. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978.

Clark, H. H. The language as fixed effect fallacy: A critique of language statistics in psychological research. Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 1973, 12, 335–339.

Graber, D. Verbal behavior and politics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976.

Hoffer, E. The true believer. New York: Mentor, 1958.

Katz, D. Patterns of leadership. In J. Knutson (Ed.), Handbook of political psychology. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973.

Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. The social psychology of organizations. New York: Wiley, 1966.

Levi, A., & Tetlock, P. E. A cognitive analysis of the Japanese decision to go to war. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1980, 24, 195–212.

Porter, C., & Suedfeld, P. Integrative complexity in the correspondence of literary figures: Effects of personal and societal stress. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1981, 40, 321–330.

Schroder, H. M. Conceptual complexity. In H. M. Schroder & P. Suedfeld (Eds.), Personality theory and information processing. New York: Ronald Press, 1971.

Schroder, H. M., Driver, M. J., & Streufert, S. Human information processing. New York: Holt, 1967.

Streufert, S., & Streufert, S. Behavior in the complex environment. Washington, D.C.: Winston, 1978.

Suedfeld, P., & Rank, A. D. Revolutionary leaders: Long-term success as a function of changes in integrative complexity. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1976, 34, 169–178.

Suedfeld, P., Tetlock, P. E., & Ramirez, C. War, peace and integrative complexity: United Nations speeches on the Middle East problem. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 1977, 21, 427–442.

Tedeschi, J. T., Schlenker, B. R., & Bonoma, T. V. Cognitive dissonance: Private ratiocination or public spectacle? American Psychologist, 1971, 26, 685–695.

Tetlock, P. E. Identifying victims of groupthink from public statements of decision makers. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1979, 37, 1314–1324.

Winer, B. J. Statistical principles in experimental design (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

Manuscripts Accepted for Publication in the Section Attitudes and Social Cognition

Personal Involvement as a Determinant of Argument-Based Persuasion. Richard Petty (Department of Psychology, University of Missouri—Columbia, Columbia, Missouri 65211), John Cacioppo, and Rachel Goldman.

Dissonance and Alcohol: Drinking Your Troubles Away. Claude M. Steele (Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98195), Lillian L. Southwick, and Barbara Critchlow.

Changing the World and Changing the Self: A Two-Process Model of Perceived Control. Fred Rothbaum (Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts 01255), John Weisz, and Sam Snyder.

Premature Cognitive Commitment. Benzion Chanowitz (Department of Psychology and Human Relations, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138) and Ellen Langer.

Belief Versus Race as Determinants of Discrimination: A Review of the Evidence and Study of Southern Adolescents in 1966 and 1979. Jeffrey L. Moe (Department of Psychology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514), Rupert W. Nacoste, and Chester A. Insko.