

Estimation Notes for Mood (1952-2014)

I have been producing versions of Mood annually or biennially since 1990. In all that time I have made the necessary decisions to produce the data series, but have not shared them. As those decisions become increasingly crucial I have decided to document them.

One reason I have not documented decisions in the past is that I didn't need to. I just ran the dyad ratios algorithm on the available database of all domestic policy preference questions and took the result as mood. That is not working anymore, forcing me to be more selective in choosing materials for analysis.

Academic and Commercial Surveys The process of choosing what queries to pose in surveys is clearly different as between academic surveys, e.g., GSS and ANES, and commercial work. The goals of academic work are scientific in the main, leading to item selection of issues in some proportion to their objective importance in politics and society. Obviously this is difficult to do and there is probably a lot of slipperiness in those proportions. But we know that when academic survey designers are asking, "Should we pose this question?" it is scientific criteria that are considered for an answer.

Commercial surveys are a business. The purpose of businesses is making a profit. Thus it is natural to think that survey designers with a profit motive are asking, "Is this a product that can be sold profitably, something that the consumers of survey data, (largely media companies and their readers and viewers), will want to buy? I happen to know a number of people who design commercial surveys and I don't wish to suggest that they lack a scientific imagination or never act from pure curiosity. Still the constraint is always present. Commercial surveys are a product and one naturally wishes to shape a product so that it will sell. "Newsworthy" is a one word summary of the idea. Commercial survey houses tend to select items that are newsworthy as a primary criterion.

The point of this discourse is that the products of academic and commercial surveys differ. Academic surveys tend to focus on issues of lasting importance and those which are central to normal political debate. Commercial

surveys tend to focus on issues of public interest, those that are “hot.” The academic work features a lot of queries on the old stable division between the parties, the main line of controversy over the size and scope of the American national government. These “New Deal” controversies divide the parties and these days do so nearly perfectly. They are central to the continuing controversy in Washington. But they are also quite stable and predictable. “Democrats favor activist government” or “Republicans oppose big government” are headlines for stories that need not be read because they are so predictable. And the “man bites dog” metaphor tells us that the usual and predictable are not newsworthy.

One can see this in the coverage of the gay marriage issue in recent years. Gay marriage is a genuine hot topic and it has produced some of the highest quality survey series in the history of survey research, the vast majority by commercial firms. There are a dozen or so ways to pose questions about marriage and, unlike the scattered and miscellaneous survey queries of the past, most commercial firms have produced good quality time series of sample responses to comparable questions on two or three of these. The net result is that the quantity and quality of the survey work on gay marriage probably exceeds that on all other topics and exceeds that on the old standard questions, health, welfare, jobs, cities, environment and the like by orders of magnitude. The same has been the case with abortion, immigration, and gun control in the recent past.

What is happening in the 21st Century is that the proportions of academic to commercial are changing fairly strongly in favor of the latter. The best of the academic studies are less frequent than they used to be, the GSS now biennial when it was once annual, the ANES quadrennial when it was once biennial. And at the same time quality improvements in the commercial world have meant that high quality item series are now much more abundant than they used to be. Quality tells in the dyad ratios algorithm; highly controlled variance in a series weighs more heavily than the noisier work that often resulted from flawed comparability in past studies.

The Statistical Issue The limitation of any exploratory dimensional analysis technique is that what comes out is a function of what goes in. What comes out used to be the first standard dimension of American politics be-

cause the item selection was dominated by academic studies, the GSS most of all. Thus the weight of the data produced the first standard dimension without any intervention on my part. New Deal sorts of issue controversies dominated the input matrix and consequently the output. What is happening with more modern data is that most of the highest quality materials are not about this standard dimension, they are social and cultural issues, abortion, immigration, gay marriage, and the like.

This mix, relatively small numbers of traditional first dimension issues with larger numbers of cultural issues is producing dimensional confusion. The cultural issues would be harmless if they were orthogonal. But they are not. They are (excepting abortion) pretty highly correlated with the scope of government dimension.

The Choice So I have to choose between accepting what comes out of the mood estimate which will be some statistical amalgam of issues or imposing a constraint on item selection so that I can force the solution to align with the scope of government controversies. I have chosen to be selective. For this estimation I have used only scope of government issues, items on business, labor, economic policy, healthcare, welfare, income equality, cities, education, taxes and the like.

I have excluded two issue domains that used to contribute to mood. One of these is gun control issues, which have always been strongly correlated with Mood. This exclusion has relatively modest effects. The other is racial issues. Racial issues trend toward liberalism over time. Including them forces estimated Mood to have that same trend. Since that trend is not shared with other issue domains, I do not believe that it belongs in the summary scale.

In essence I have had to choose between a solution that measures a theoretical known and meaningful dimension and one which is a best fit to a data matrix that is the product of very mixed motives. I have chosen the theoretically meaningful.