THE RAS MODEL: A SIMPLE TEST

Agnieszka Dobrzynska and André Blais

Department of Political Science Université de Montréal

 $\frac{agnieszka.dobrzynska@umontreal.ca}{andre.blais@umontreal.ca}$

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ABSTRACT

In 1992 John Zaller formulated the most influential theory of opinion formation, the Receive-Accept-Sample, or RAS, model. The theory describes conditions under which a message is received, and, if received, accepted or rejected. According to Zaller the reception of a message depends on the intensity of the message and on individuals' general level of political awareness. And the highly aware should be more able to resist a message when the latter does not accord with their predispositions.

The aim of the paper is to propose a simple and direct test of the RAS model. The study deals with the 1988 Canadian election, an election that was fiercely fought over one central issue, the Free Trade Accord with the United States. We use the 1988 Canadian Election Study campaign rolling cross-section survey, and we test Zaller's propositions about who is most likely to receive, and then accept the parties' messages about the central issue of the election.

Our findings provide little support for the RAS model, especially the proposition about how acceptance hinges on the interaction of predispositions and political awareness. We discuss the implications of the findings. We suggest that when an issue is hotly debated in an election campaign, the voters who receive the party messages are able to connect them to their values and predispositions.

Testing the RAS Model: Free Trade in the 1988 Canadian Election

More than ten years ago, Zaller (1992) formulated the most influential theory about the formation of public opinion, the RAS (receive-accept-sample) model. According to the theory, public opinion is formed in two sequences; a message is received (or not received) by the individual, and then the message (if received) is accepted or not. Zaller argues that these two sequences have two distinct logics.

The reception of a message hinges first and foremost on the individual's level of political awareness. The highly aware, who follow politics closely, are much more likely to receive messages than the least aware, who are largely inattentive to politics.

Things are different with respect to the second stage, the acceptance of the message. An individual's reaction to the message depends first on her values or predispositions; an individual is more likely to accept the message if the latter fits with her own value orientations and to reject it if it is inconsistent with them.

Zaller asserts, and this is his main contribution, that this pattern is more pronounced among the most politically aware. The highly aware are more able to make the connection between their general values and the specific messages that they receive, and they are consequently more prone to accept or reject messages on the basis of their predispositions. As Zaller (1992, 44) puts it, "the key to resistance, in this formulation, is information concerning the relationship between arguments and predispositions, where the requisite information is carried in cueing messages".

The RAS model thus predicts an interaction effect between predispositions and awareness at the acceptance stage. The message is most likely to be accepted by those

whose values are congruent with the content of the message *and* who are politically aware, and it is most likely to be rejected by those whose values are incongruent *and* who are also aware. Opinion should be polarized along basic values among the politically aware persons.

The model is more complicated. The impact of awareness depends on characteristics of the message. Zaller identifies two characteristics of the message: its intensity and familiarity. The greater the intensity and familiarity of the message, the weaker the effect of awareness. If the message is very intense and familiar, even the least aware should receive it, and they should also be able to make the connections with their basic values. Thus the direct effect of awareness on reception and its interactive effect on acceptance should be particularly strong when the message is neither intense nor familiar.

Zaller first elaborates his model with respect to a simple case with only one message but he subsequently moves on to consider two-sided information flows. The main conclusion here is that "attitude change in response to a two-sided message can take different forms at different points in time, depending on the relative intensities of the opposing messages and the prior distribution of opinion" (Zaller 1992, 207). In the case of a relatively intense campaign opposing two competing messages with comparable visibility, the situation that we will be analyzing in this paper, the prediction is that public opinion will polarize across partisan lines, especially so among the most aware (Zaller 1992, 250-252).

Zaller's theoretical contribution is two-fold. First, he clearly distinguishes the two stages of opinion formation: the reception and the acceptance of the message. He

formulates one distinct axiom for each stage. Second, he predicts an interaction effect between predispositions and awareness at the acceptance stage.

We propose below a simple and direct test of the RAS model. Contrary to Zaller, and in a manner that we believe is more consistent with the spirit of the model, we propose a sequential test of the model, in which we first examine who is most likely to receive party messages and we then determine who is most likely to accept those messages.

The case under study is the 1988 Canadian election that was fought around one central issue, the proposed free trade agreement between Canada and the United States. The two basic hypotheses, which directly flow from the RAS model, are that the highly aware were the most likely to have received the party messages on the issue and that opinions on the issue were the joint effect of general predispositions and political awareness.

The Free Trade Election and the RAS Model

The 1988 Canadian election provides a good opportunity to test the RAS model. The 1988 election was a one issue election, as the proposed Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States monopolized the agenda. The FTA issue was fiercely debated over the course of the campaign. It was, therefore, an emotional issue that raised concerns about the very identity of Canada and its relationship with its big and powerful neighbor, but at the same time it was an issue that many voters were unfamiliar with, because the proposed Free Trade agreement contained many technical elements

¹ From the beginning of campaign, the majority of voters named free trade as the most important issue and its importance grew up as the campaign progressed. The analysis of the televised media coverage indicated that the news coverage was clearly dominated by FTA (Johnston and al. 1992, 115-116)

whose concrete implications were difficult to predict. The issue polarized the political elites and the result was a bidirectional message. The incumbent Conservative Party supported the Free Trade Agreement whereas the two opposition parties, the Liberals and the New Democratic Party, opposed it. We can suppose that two competing messages were of similar intensity. There were some fluctuations in media coverage over the course of the campaign, coverage becoming sometimes more positive or negative, but, taking the campaign as a whole, "coverage of the FTA is striking for its balance" (Johnston et al. 1992, 118).

This situation corresponds to the two-sided information flow with roughly evenly divided elites on both sides of the FTA issue conveying two contrary messages, one supporting and the other opposing FTA. In view of this, we should observe a polarization effect. At the reception stage, increases in political awareness should lead to greater reception of both messages, in favor and against free trade between Canada and United States, whatever the political predispositions. We hypothesize that:

H1: The most politically aware are more likely to receive party messages on Canada/US ties. They are more likely to know that the Conservative Party (and its leader) favor closer Canada/US ties and that the Liberals and NDP (and their leaders) oppose closer ties between both countries.²

At the acceptance stage, we have to take into account the reception process and consequently our hypotheses are limited to those who have received party messages. First, we expect political awareness to facilitate the formation of opinion about FTA

² All hypotheses are stated in static terms but later we offer dynamic versions.

(H2a). Secondly, predispositions should help individuals form an opinion in conformity with their underlying values (H2b). And finally, political awareness should promote the polarization of opinion. In other words, the most politically aware should accept only those messages consistent with their predispositions (H2c). We hypothesize that:

H2a. The most politically aware are more likely to have an opinion about FTA.

H2b. Those with positive predispositions are more likely to support FTA whereas those having negative predispositions are more likely to oppose FTA.

H2c. The most politically aware are more likely to accept a message that is consistent with their predispositions. They are more likely to support FTA if they have positive predispositions and they are more likely to oppose FTA if they have negative predispositions.

FTA was very intensely debated but its familiarity was limited. High intensity should enable the least aware to receive both messages but low familiarity should cancel out the effect of intensity. As a consequence, the most aware should be better able to make a connection between the direction of their predispositions and the messages received. Therefore, we expect a fairly strong effect of awareness on the formation of public opinion on FTA during the 1988 Canadian electoral campaign.

We use the 1988 Canadian Election Study (CES). This study employed a rolling cross-section design for the campaign-period survey in which a total of 3,609 eligible Canadian voters were interviewed on a wide range of questions. Approximately 80

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³ With regard to those who do not have predispositions, the most aware should not behave differently from the least aware individuals. They should receive and accept both messages, and as a result they should be ambivalent.

interviews were completed for each of the 47 days of the campaign. As the daily replicates were identical within the limits of sampling error, all that distinguished them was the passage of time. Such a design allows us to examine the evolution of respondents' opinion during the campaign and to capture the effects of pro and anti FTA messages. In particular, we can see if over the course of the campaign the FTA messages were more likely to be received by the most aware voters and then we verify if, among those who received the messages, the highly aware were more able to support/oppose FTA on the basis of their predispositions.

The Reception of Party Messages

At the reception stage, we relate knowledge of messages about FTA to three alternative measures of political awareness. The dependent variable is the individual ability to correctly identify the positions of each party and leader on the issue of whether Canada should have closer or more distant ties with the United States. Separate questions were asked during the campaign about the position of each party and each leader. All in all, about half of the respondents were able to indicate that the Conservative Party and its leader (Brian Mulroney) wanted Canada to have closer ties with the United States and that the Liberal Party and NDP (and their leaders, John Turner and Ed Broadbent) did not want closer ties (see the Appendix for the description of all variables). These are the persons who are construed to have received the party messages and who are scored 1 on the reception variable.

⁴ Ideally, we should have questions measuring knowledge of parties' positions on the Free Trade Agreement. Such questions were not asked. We use questions about whether the parties (and leaders) wanted closer ties with the United States as a proxy for knowledge of party positions on FTA.

The key independent variable is political awareness. We use three different measures of political awareness: an index of political awareness, an index of media attentiveness and political interest. The index of political awareness is composed of several questions measuring respondents' factual knowledge about local candidates and campaign issues and subjective knowledge of the leaders and local candidates.⁵ Media attentiveness is based on questions measuring the degree of attention respondents paid to television news and to articles in the newspaper about the election campaign. Political interest corresponds to respondents' general interest in politics.

We wish to determine whether general values matter at the stage of reception (they should not, according to Zaller). We combined two indicators of general predispositions: party identification and the respondent's own position about whether Canada should have closer or more distant ties with the United States. If the respondent has a very or fairly strong identification with Conservative Party and if she wants closer Canada/US ties, or if she identifies with the Conservatives but has no opinion on Canada/US ties, or if she wants closer ties but has no party identification, she is considered to have positive predispositions towards the pro-FTA Conservative message. If the respondent has a very or fairly strong identification with the Liberal Party or NDP and if she opposes closer Canada/US ties, or if she identifies with the Liberal Party or NDP but has no opinion on Canada/US ties, or if she opposes closer Canada/US ties but has no party identification, she is considered to have negative predispositions. If the respondent has no party identification and no opinion on Canada/US ties or if she has a party identification that is inconsistent with her opinion on Canada/US ties (for example she identifies with the Conservatives but she is opposed to closer links with the US), she

⁵ This is very close to Zaller's index of factual information.

is construed as having no clear predisposition. Our measure combines partisan and ideological predispositions.⁶

We propose two different tests of reception model. The first test is static. The second is dynamic. We determine not only whether the highly aware were more prone to receive the party messages but also whether they learned more during the campaign.

The findings are reported in Table 1. Column 1 confirms that knowledge of party positions on Canada/US relationship increases with the overall level of political awareness, and the degree of political interest and media attention. Indeed, 65% of respondents in the upper third of the awareness index knew the party positions on FTA, only 30% did among those in the lower third. The relationship is clear and strong, and it is not explained away by media attention and political interest. Table 1 also establishes that, as the RAS model predicts, reception of the party messages is *not* correlated with general predispositions.

[Table 1 about here]

Column 2 of Table 1 provides a dynamic test of the model. The debate on FTA was quite intense but at the same time the issue was new and technical, and so we expect the typical pattern whereby the gap between the least and the most aware increases during the course of the campaign. If so, we should observe a positive interaction effect between day of the campaign and the index of political awareness. The coefficient of the interaction variable is positive but it is tiny and clearly not significant. We must thus reject the hypothesis that the most aware learned more about party positions over the course of the campaign.

⁶ The results are substantially similar when we use only partisan or only ideological predispositions.

The Acceptance of Party Messages

At the acceptance stage, we perform a multinomial logit regression relating political awareness, predispositions, and the interaction between these two variables to support or opposition to the Free Trade Agreement. The acceptance model is tested among those who received party messages; those who did not receive them could not form their opinion on the basis of these messages. The dependent variable is opinion on FTA, with three categories: support, opposition, and no opinion. The latter is the reference category.

The model has three key independent variables. First, predispositions. Those who want closer ties with the U.S. and/or who identify with the Conservative party should be more inclined to support the free trade agreement and less prone to oppose it. Second, the level of political awareness. As there was no elite consensus on this issue, we do not expect the better informed to be more supportive or negative, but we do predict that they will be more able to form an opinion than the least informed. So, the hypothesis is that the most aware will be somewhat more likely to both support and oppose the agreement (rather than having no opinion).

But the crucial contribution of the RAS model concerns the interactive term between political awareness and predispositions. This interaction allows us to determine whether the link between predispositions and opinion on FTA intensifies as the level of political awareness increases. Again, we test static and dynamic models of acceptance. We introduce a dynamic component (interaction with the day of interview) to test whether the highly aware were more likely to change their opinion over the course of the campaign according to their predispositions.

Table 2 presents the findings of the static model. As expected, opinion on FTA is strongly influenced by partisan and ideological predispositions. We also find the most aware to be more prone to have formed an opinion on FTA. Contrary to our expectations, awareness appears to lead to a specific opinion, that is, the most aware seem to be more inclined to support rather than oppose the free trade agreement. We do not have a ready explanation for this pattern. We note, however, that the most aware were also more prone to approve the Charlottetown Accord in 1992 (Johnston et al. 1996), an issue around which there was a basic elite consensus. The fact that the same pattern emerges in two issues that should produce different results (because the elite was united in one instance and divided in the other case) is inconsistent with the RAS model.

[Table 2 about here]

The most important result concerns the interaction terms. The interaction terms are clearly not significant, and they have the wrong sign (the interaction term should be positive for "support" and negative for "oppose"). We must reject the hypothesis that the most aware are more able to connect their general predispositions to the specific issue at hand. This nil finding, it should be pointed out, is entirely consistent with Goren's (2004, 474) conclusion that "the sophistication-interaction model does not apply as broadly as the conventional wisdom presumes".

The results of the dynamic model are shown in Table 3. We look separately at those with positive and negative predispositions (the model has no clear predictions about those without predispositions). The basic proposition to be tested is that the propensity to support the agreement among those with positive predispositions, and to oppose it among those with negative predispositions, increases as the campaign progresses. There is no

empirical support for that proposition. The interaction term has the good (positive) sign in column 1 and the wrong (positive) sign in column 4, but both are statistically non significant.

[Table 3 about here]

The interaction term is statistically significant only in column 3. It appears that the greater propensity not to support FTA as election day approached among those with negative predispositions (reflected in the -.12 coefficient associated with "day") was less pronounced among the most aware (reflected in the opposite sign of the interaction term). This result contradicts our expectations. It would seem that movement away from supporting the agreement was weaker among the most aware.

In order to understand better this result, we computed the mean probability of supporting the agreement, opposing it, or having no opinion under nine different scenarios combining levels of awareness (low, medium, high) and moments of the campaign (beginning, middle, end).⁷ We focus on the group with negative predispositions, which exhibits more movement (see Table 3).

[Table 4 about here]

The results are presented in Table 4. According to the RAS theory, the most important change during the campaign should occur among the most aware. In fact, we observe the opposite. The mean probability of supporting FTA decreases by .66 and the mean probability of opposing it increases by .59 in the low awareness group; the equivalent changes are .55 and .43 in the high awareness group. But the main story is that there was substantial movement in the two groups, of similar magnitude and in the

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⁷ In the case of low awareness we put every individual at 0 on the awareness scale, in the case of high awareness every individual was put at 1, and for middle awareness every individual was assigned a score of .5. As for the moment of campaign, "beginning" refers to day 1, "middle" to day 23, and "end" to day 47.

same direction. Awareness did not matter much. We also note that no opinion, basically ambivalence since we are dealing here with a group that has received party messages, increased over the course of the campaign.

Conclusion

We have looked at how Canadians, in 1988, formed their opinion on the central issue of the campaign, the proposed free trade agreement with the United States. We have proposed a simple and direct test to determine whether the RAS model, the most influential theory about the formation of public opinion, could account for the reception and acceptance of party messages about the FTA.

Our findings provide little support for the RAS model. We do observe that the most aware were more likely to receive the party messages but they were not more likely to learn more during the course of the campaign. And, most importantly, the highly aware were not more prone to form their opinion on the basis of their predispositions.

It might be argued that our findings do not necessarily contradict the RAS model because the interpretation of the results hinges on the assumptions that we make about the balance, intensity and familiarity of the messages. This is a fair point. Still our assumptions that this was a very intense and balanced campaign opposing two camps on an issue that was partly emotional but also partly quite technical and unfamiliar, are, we believe, quite plausible. And this raises an important problem with the theory. Because the predictions of the theory vary according to characteristics of the issue and because there is some ambiguity about how to define intensity and familiarity, it may be too easy

to argue, ex post, that since we have such results we must have had the kind of context that the theory predicts is associated with the patterns that are empirically observed.

It could also be argued that the RAS model cannot be dismissed on the basis of one single case. Again this is a fair point. But our findings are broadly consistent with those of Goren (2004) who examines a total of thirteen cases. Furthermore, our study is dealing with one case where public opinion mattered a lot, that is, the outcome of the election, and the adoption of the free trade agreement, hinged on the judgement that ordinary citizens made about the virtues and vices of FTA. We would like a theory about the formation of public opinion to be particularly fruitful for those cases where public opinion is meaningful.

Our findings question Zaller's resistance axiom, according to which "people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions" (Zaller 1992, 44). That axiom is true by definition. Zaller (1992, 48) correctly notes that "awareness can be expected to enhance resistance to persuasion only when the full significance of the issue or survey question is to some degree obscure" but adds that obscurity is extremely common in politics. Perhaps it is, but the findings presented here suggest that it is quite easy for everyone who is attentive enough to receive party messages on the central issue of an election to determine which messages are consistent and which ones are inconsistent with her values and predispositions. When it matters the most, that is with respect to the most important issue in an election, the least aware who get the messages are able to interpret them correctly.

Appendix: Description of Variables

Dependent Variables:

Reception: Knowledge of party positions on Canada/US ties

Respondents were asked whether each federal party and each federal leader thinks that

Canada should be much closer to the United States, somewhat closer, about the same as

now, somewhat more distant or much more distant. If the respondent said that

Conservatives and Brian Mulroney want closer links with the US than the Liberals and

the Liberals, the NDP, John Turner and Ed Broadbent oppose closer ties, the variable was

coded 1, otherwise it was coded 0.

Acceptance: Individual opinion on Free Trade Agreement

Respondents were asked whether they support, oppose or neither support nor oppose a

Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Those who supported FTA were coded 1,

those who opposed were coded -1, and no opinion was coded 0.

Independent Variables:

Media Attentiveness:

Respondents were asked two questions indicating the degree of attention they paid to

television news and to articles in the newspaper about the election campaign (a great

deal, quite a bit, some, very little or none). The variable is the mean of responses to the

two questions and was coded on a 0 to 1 scale.

Political Interest:

Respondents were asked if they followed politics generally very closely, fairly closely,

not very closely, or not at all. The variable was coded from 0 to 1.

Political Awareness:

The index of political awareness is composed of twenty indicators measuring

respondents' factual knowledge about the local candidates and campaign issues and

subjective knowledge about leaders and local candidates. The variable was coded from 0

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- to 1. Respondents were asked, with respect to each party (Conservatives, Liberals and NDP) whether:
- they knew that the party nominated a candidate in their riding
- they remembered the name of party candidate in their riding
- the party thinks that much more, somewhat more, about the same as now, some less, or much less should be done to promote French
- the party thinks the level of taxes and services should be much higher, somewhat higher, about the same, somewhat lower or much lower

Respondents were also asked subjective questions about the parties' leaders (Mulroney, Turner, Broadbent) and local candidates whether they knew quite a lot, a fair amount, just a little, or nothing at all about them.

Predispositions:

The variable is composed of two questions, about party identification and the individual's own position on Canada/US ties. First, respondents were asked to indicate their party identification and the strength of their identification (very strong, fairly strong or not very strong). Second, they were asked whether they think that Canada should be much closer to the United States, somewhat closer, about the same as now, somewhat more distant or much more distant. If the respondent has a very or fairly strong identification with the Conservative Party and if she wants closer Canada/US ties, or if she identifies with the Conservatives but has no opinion on Canada/US ties, or if she wants closer ties but identifies with no party, the variable was coded 1 indicating positive predispositions. If the respondent has a very or fairly strong identification with the Liberal Party or NDP and if she opposes closer Canada/US ties, or if she identifies with the Liberals or NDP but has no opinion on Canada/US ties, or if she opposes stronger ties with the US but she has no party identification, the variable was coded -1 indicating negative predispositions. If the respondent has no party identification and no opinion on Canada/US ties or if she has a party identification inconsistent with her opinion on Canada/US ties, the variable was coded 0.

Day:

The variable takes the values from 1 to 47 corresponding to the 47 days of the campaign.

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Table 1. The Reception of Party Messages on Canada/US Ties

(Logit Regression, Robust Estimates)

	Static Model	Dynamic Model
Variables	Coeff. (S.E.)	Coeff. (S.E.)
Media Attentiveness	.72 (.21) **	.69 (.20) *
Political Interest	.44 (.21) *	.44 (.21)**
Index of Political Awareness	2.35 (.24) **	2.01 (.46) **
Predispositions	02 (.05)	02 (.05)
Day		.001 (.01)
Index of Political Awareness * Day		.01 (.02)
Constant	-1.85 (.14)	-1.85 (.26)
N	3123	3120
Pseudo R ²	.10	.08
Log pseudo-likelihood	-1663.40	-1982.86

Note: The dependent variable is a binary item indicating that a person knows that Conservatives want closer ties with the United States (0) or that opposition parties (Liberals and New Democratic Party) do not want closer ties (1).

^{*} significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test)

^{**} significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

Table 2. The Acceptance of Party Messages on FTA: A Static Model (Multinomial Logit Regression, Robust Estimates)

	Support FTA versus No Opinion	Oppose FTA versus No Opinion
Variables	Coeff. (S.E.)	Coeff. (S.E.)
Political Awareness	1.62 (.47) **	.57 (.52)
Predispositions	1.28 (.32) **	-1.23 (.37) **
Awareness * Predispositions	19 (.50)	.46 (.58)
Constant	17 (.31)	.27 (.34)
N = 1606 Pseudo $R^2 = .27$ Log pseudo-likelihood = -1179.09		

Note: The dependent variable is a multinomial item on Free Trade Agreement: support, opposition, and no opinion. The reference category is "no opinion".

^{*} significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test) significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

Table 3. The Acceptance of Party Messages on FTA: A Dynamic Model (Multinomial Logit Regression, Robust Estimates)

	<u>Positive Predispositions</u>		Negative Predispositions	
	Support FTA versus No Opinion	Oppose FTA versus No Opinion	Support FTA versus No Opinion	Oppose FTA versus No Opinion
Variables	Coeff. (S.E.)	Coeff. (S.E.)	Coeff. (S.E.)	Coeff. (S.E.)
Political Awareness	.24 (1.27)	11 (1.46)	-1.58 (1.47)	-1.06 (1.18)
Day	.002 (.03)	.001 (.04)	12 (.05) **	002 (.03)
Awareness * Day	.05 (.05)	.04 (.06)	.17 (.07) *	.05 (.05)
Constant	1.12 (.77)	66 (.92)	.84 (.97)	1.60 (.70)
N	608		828	
Pseudo R ²	.02		.03	
Log pseudo-likelihood	-389.57		-588.37	

Note: The dependent variable is a multinomial item on Free Trade Agreement: support, opposition, and no opinion. The reference category is "no opinion".

^{*} significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test) significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

Table 4. The Impact of Awareness and Campaign Dynamics on Opinion on FTA (Negative Predispositions Group)

Mean probability of :

	Support FTA	Oppose FTA	No Opinion
Low awareness			
Beginning of campaign	.68	.28	.04
Middle of campaign	.23	.68	.08
End of campaign	.02	.87	.10
Middle awareness			
Beginning of campaign	.63	.31	.07
Middle of campaign	.19	.68	.13
End of campaign	.02	.82	.16
High awareness			
Beginning of campaign	.56	.32	.12
Middle of campaign	.15	.64	.21
End of campaign	.01	.75	.24