

American National Politics, 1945-1999: Problems of Classification

Steve Casburn
12 May 2000
Semester Paper (Draft 2)
Miksa – Classification of Knowledge

Abstract

This paper proposes a classification system for American national politics from 1945 through 1999. It first explains the nature of the problem and gives a definition of "national politics." It then proposes an analytico-synthetic classification system for the InBEs related to American national politics, discusses the system's evolution, describes each facet in the proposed system, and discusses one of the facets in much greater depth. Finally, the paper details several potential problems in classifying the InBEs that are relevant to the subject.

1 Introduction

National politics has always been central to American life. The United States was founded by men who believed that a broader portion of the people of the nation should be involved in selecting the leaders of the country than was customary in Europe. Over the course of the next two centuries, this political franchise was broadened again and again, until now nearly every American citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote.

With such a large potential electorate to reach and persuade (even the smallest congressional districts contain more than 250,000 potential voters), candidates for political office, the organizations they represent (or oppose), and other associated organizations generate or are the focus of a vast array of information-bearing entities (InBEs). To classify these entities is not only an interesting exercise in its own right, but also useful to understanding how politics on a national scale works in the United States. To devise an accurate classification of the InBEs of American national politics is to build a finding aid that would illustrate how political power is distributed, maintained and used in this country.

This paper explores how such a classification system might be arranged for the American national politics from 1945 through 1999, and explains some of the problems that face any classifier of the subject. It will begin by providing a (necessarily narrow) definition of "national

politics" (section 2), then present a tentative classification scheme (section 3 and appendix I), and finally describe some of the problems involved in classifying the InBEs that would go into the scheme (section 4). Afterwards, a summary will be provided, significant conclusions will be pointed out, and appendices containing supplementary information will be presented.

2 "National politics" defined and bounded

The concept of "politics" is notoriously difficult to define, because of the number of activities it comprises and the number of areas it touches upon. Broadly defined, "politics" could include vast swathes of material that would usually be considered to be matters of finance, psychology, sociology, history, and even statistics. Narrowly defined, it might include nothing more than the on-the-job activities of the people who work in politics.

This paper will define "American national politics" as:

- (1) the work-related activities of those people who actively work to elect their chosen candidate or candidates to a national office (i.e., President, Vice-President, Senator, or Representative) or offices; and,
- (2) the activities of other people when and to the extent that they directly and knowingly interact with the activities described in (1).

Included in part 1 are the political activities of political candidates, political parties, political consultants, and special-interest groups (among others) to the extent that those activities were intended to aid in the election of a particular candidate or candidates to a particular national office or offices. Included in part 2 are the activities of the media and regulatory agencies (among others) when they act upon the national electoral process.

In addition to the above definition, it should be stated that politics is a profession, and the job of professional politicians is to bring together competing groups of people and help them to resolve their problems, whether through compromise, log-rolling, browbeating, blackmail, or any other of a hundred methods. The key fact there is that politics involves *groups of people*; people who seek the help and mediation of professional politicians. That insight has informed the design of the classification system that follows.

InBEs that would be included within this classification system are those InBEs that were generated in the course of the activities defined and described above.

3 Notes toward a classification

To write a full classification of the InBEs of American national politics would be the work of a lifetime, but it is possible after three months of study to put forward confidently a schema for the broad outline of such a classification.

3.1 Original plan

In my original plan for this paper, I listed five main classes for the material I expected to find (or find out about):

(A) *National elections*: comprises all activities related to presidential and congressional elections -- political campaigns, campaign laws, election results, primary results, poll results, campaign advertisements, media punditry, etc.

(B) *National political parties / groups / politicians*: comprises the people and collections of people who participate in national politics -- major and minor political parties, special interest groups, civic action groups, think tanks, lobbyists, journalists, pundits, consultants, campaign workers and volunteers, etc.

(C) *Major political philosophies / theories / texts*: comprises the ideas, philosophies, and texts that animate and shape political discussion -- conservatism, liberalism, libertarianism, socialism, communism, the free market, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, environmentalism,

Conscience of a Conservative, Putting People First, The Bell Curve, An American Dilemma, etc.

(D) *National political issues*: comprises the specific issues that are raised in the course of political campaigns and that influence people's voting patterns -- inflation, unemployment, foreign policy, affirmative action, the death penalty, etc.

(E) *National political events*: comprises specific events that occur which materially affect political campaigns -- the Iran hostage crisis, the OPEC embargo, Eisenhower's heart attack, the Los Angeles riots, the Tet offensive, etc. (It might turn out that this subtopic should be combined with the national political issues subtopic.)

3.2 Modifications to the original plan

In the course of doing further research for this paper, I uncovered several shortcomings in the above scheme for grouping.

3.2.1 Ranganathan (1)

The simplicity of Ranganathan's five general facets inspired an effort to re-think the above main classes. As a result, I decided to group elections with events, because both are happenings that exist in a definable interval of time. The result of this re-grouping was to temporarily reduce the five main classes to four. (See Section 3.2.5 for further influence from Ranganathan.)

3.2.2 Goehlert & Martin

The number of main classes re-expanded after I reviewed the arrangement that Goehlert & Martin use for their bibliographic index of political science sources related to American national elections [Goehlert & Martin, "Contents" ff.]. I added four new main classes: constituencies, strategy & consultants, media, and laws.

Studying Goehlert & Martin's scheme of arrangement (along with the ideas in [Karp]) also led me to think about the nature of American national politics in a different way. I began to see politics as a process in which various distinct yet inter-related (and interdependent!) groups of people – politicians, party officials, lobbyists, executive and legislative staff, the media – meet in order to gain or retain power, privilege, and fame.

A further brief discussion of Goehlert & Martin's arrangement can be found in Appendix II.

3.2.3 LCSH

I decided to examine how the Library of Congress catalogers divided up American national politics into topics. To do this, I compiled from LCSH 22 an extensive but probably incomplete list of LC subject headings that dealt with the subject, and sorted those headings into my main classes (the sorted subject headings can be found in Appendix II).

The compiled list of related LC subject headings suggested to me that I might want to separate the process of elections (the voting and the tabulating and publishing of results) from the event of elections, because the means by which the votes are gathered have no relation to the effect of the election itself. I ultimately decided, however, that the process of elections was not a large enough topic to deserve its own main class.

3.2.4 Miscellaneous

As a result of the instructor's comments on my original proposal, I realized that I needed to expand the "constituencies" main class to include the services (e.g., help with government red tape) that congressmen provide in their local offices for their voting constituents.

After reviewing several of my sources [Birnbaum, Green, Luntz, Phillips], I concluded that politicians are independent enough of political parties to require a separate main class rather than a joint class. (I considered subsuming political parties into the "constituencies" main class, but decided against it for reasons discussed below.)

I decided that the offices that politicians seek (and the offices which they can bestow upon their supporters) should be treated as independent entities and given their own main class.

I also decided to add "theorists" to the "philosophies and texts" main class, to recognize the fact that there are InBEs about the theorists as people in addition to InBEs about the work they produce.

3.2.5 Ranganathan (2)

Upon reading Ranganathan's work further, I decided to throw out the entire original classification and develop a fully faceted analytico-synthetic classification system. The details of this system are described below in Section 3.3.

3.3 Revised plan

As a result of the revisions detailed above, the classification plan became what is described below.

3.3.1 Analytico-synthetic classification

The concept of analytico-synthetic classification was first proposed in its entirety by S. R. Ranganathan (elements of it had previously existed in the Dewey Decimal Classification). Rather than providing a "single schedule as in enumerative classification" [e.g., the Library of Congress system], an analytico-synthetic classification system gives "a series of schedules in which the fundamental constituent concepts are arranged" [Ranganathan 1992, 87].

In such a system, the class number for an InBE is assigned not by guessing what subject heading would best fit the entity and looking up

the class number for that heading, but rather it is “constructed by (1) first breaking down the specific subject into its fundamental constituent concepts; (2) picking out from the appropriate schedules enumerated in the scheme the corrected number for each of these concepts; and (3) synthesising the numbers so picked out, in a prescribed way” [Ranganathan 1992, 88]. The result resembles a database, in which each of a set of objects can be described in several different fields, and each field can be searched on individually.

Such a classification system would be suitable for a classification of the InBEs of modern American national politics because there are multiple ways one can approach and interpret politics, and an analytico-synthetic classification system would give libraries and researchers the ability to arrange the InBEs according to which characteristics they think are most important and relevant. If the most useful arrangement of the material in one setting is by person, then that can be done; if the most useful arrangement in another setting is by geographical area, then that can be done just as easily.

An analytico-synthetic classification system would also easily allow for the classification of polytopical items, because class numbers can be concatenated indefinitely within each facet. For example, a book about John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon could be identified as related to both Kennedy and Nixon, rather than as related to one or another, and could

be filed under Kennedy or Nixon, depending on how it would fit better into the collection.

3.3.2 Analytico-synthetic facets

I have identified seven facets that would be useful for classifying an InBE related to American national politics, and in each case have suggested a characteristic by which the first-level classes of the facet should be dissected (in most cases, the selection seems to be a simple matter).

3.3.2.1 **Persons**

The Persons facet includes all of the people who have been directly and knowingly active in American national politics. Among these people are the politicians themselves, campaign strategists, media pundits, political philosophers, and political party officials.

The schedule for this facet should resemble the authority file of the DDC or LC, in which every person is identified separately and as precisely as possible (at a minimum, full name, birth date, and death date). A class number should be assigned to each entry in the schedule, with its length in inverse proportion to the importance of the person (Lyndon Johnson would have a short number; a Chicago precinct captain would have a long number).

3.3.2.2 Offices

The Offices facet includes the four political offices that are the prizes in national political elections (President, Vice-President, Senator, and Representative) as well as any patronage offices that the winner of one of the four political offices can hand out.

The schedule for this facet should contain a separate class number for each office.

3.3.2.3 Cliques

The Cliques facet includes the various groups that are involved in American national politics. Groups are defined here as a set of people who have a common interest that compels them to become involved together in American national politics. These groups can be occupational (the media, campaign strategists) or ideological (special-interest groups).

(A suggested order-one array for the Cliques facet is in Appendix I.)

3.3.2.4 Issues

The Issues facet includes the various issues which have materially affected American national politics. These include general issues (inflation, unemployment, civil rights, etc.) as well as specific events (the Korean War, the Bicentennial, the Iran Hostage Crisis, etc.)

The schedule for this facet would include a class number for every major issue and event.

3.3.2.5 Areas

The Areas facet includes any geographical area that is relevant to the InBE. These areas could be as broad as the nation, or as narrow as a voting precinct.

The schedule for this facet would have an order-one array of regions, an order-two array of states, an order-three array of counties or metropolitan areas, and so on until the nation has been subdivided into its smallest significant political areas (probably the voting precinct).

3.3.2.6 Election cycles

The Election cycles facet includes the time element of the InBE, and should be dissected into two-year segments based on the interval between congressional elections. (Because the Constitution mandates elections for all members of the House of Representatives and a third of the members of the Senate every two years, there is a natural two-year cycle of national political life that runs from one January of an odd year to the next January of an odd year.)

The schedules for this facet would have a class number for each election cycle as well as class numbers for months, days, hours, and minutes.

3.3.2.7 Forms

The Forms facet identifies the physical format of the InBE. The forms in which political InBEs can be found include newspapers, videotapes, campaign buttons, posters, office stationery, etc.

The schedule for this facet would include a class number for each kind of physical form.

4 Problems in classification

The above classification system allows us to see some of the questions that would arise in designing any classification system for the InBEs that are created by the process of American national politics. Listed below are some of those questions:

* How should a classification system handle people changing jobs? In Washington, it was common throughout the period of 1945-1999 for former politicians to become lobbyists or pundits, and during the 1990s it became increasingly common for staff people and pundits to become politicians. The case of Pat Buchanan – who went from being a political staff member to being a media pundit to being a Republican politician to being a media pundit again to being a Republican politician again to being a media pundit again to being a Reform Party politician – is one

example of how the roles and identities of an individual can change over time. Any successful classification system will have to be able to account for the way that people in politics are at once defined by their jobs yet retain their personal identity after changing jobs.

* How should a classification system handle the case of lobbyists, who could be considered to be members of a special-interest group (because they are paid to plead on behalf of such groups) or be considered to be political consultants (because, like political consultants, most lobbyists work for independent firms, dispense political advice, and engage in political action)?

* How should a classification system handle situations in which a party changes its principles or even its identity over time? During the period of 1945-1999, the Democratic Party changed from a party in which "Southern conservatism is an invaluable asset" [Acheson, 43] to one in which Southern conservatism is an implacable enemy. Is the Democratic Party still the same party, then? Or is it a fundamentally different entity that has retained the same name?

* How should a classification system handle parties that splinter off from a major party, but later re-join it in part or in full? During the period of 1945-1999, the major example of this phenomenon was the Dixiecrat Party of 1948, which split away from the Democratic Party to protest the Democratic platform plank calling for federal action to guarantee the civil rights of blacks. By 1952, most of the Dixiecrats had returned to the

Democratic Party (though many defected to the Republican Party a decade later) [Key, 267]. Are the Dixiecrats then to be considered as a completely separate party, or as an offshoot of the Democratic Party?

* How should a classification system handle conflicting claims over the meaning of a philosophical term? One of the loudest debates in politics during the period of 1945-1999 was that of who should be considered a conservative and who should be read out of the movement. [Viereck, Kristol] (In addition, there was the question of whether someone who was once a conservative should still be considered a conservative.) A classification system could be designed in three different ways to deal with this kind of situation: allow anyone who claims the label to have it, take sides and define who is right and who is wrong, or increase the granularity of the descriptor so that (to take the above case as an illustration) there are no "conservatives" at all, but rather there are "*National Review* conservatives" or "new conservatives" or "neo-conservatives".

* How should a classification system handle boundary changes, whether at the county level (rare), the voting precinct level (less rare), or at the congressional district level (at least once per decade)? If a congressional district changes its boundaries but retains the same district number, then to what extent should it be treated by the classification system as an on-going entity? If a voting precinct changes its boundaries

but retains the same precinct number, then how should the voting records of the precinct be labeled?

* How should a classification system handle ghostwritten material? Should it be considered as the product of its actual author(s), or as the product of its credited author?

5 Conclusion

This paper has explored how one might construct a classification system that could accurately represent and arrange the InBEs of American national politics from 1945 through 1999, and has related the problems that face classifiers of the subject.

Appendix I: Order-one array for the Cliques facet

As Section 2 points out, American national politics is in large part the interaction between various groups of people. The Cliques facet is the facet in which these groups of people are classed and enumerated.

The schedule entries suggested below are not intended to be an exhaustive list of the groups that could be included. Indeed, one of the strengths of an analytico-synthetic classification is that new groups can be easily added to the schedule of the facet.

AI.1 Political parties

The Political Parties group contains InBEs related to those political parties whose candidates compete for national offices. These InBEs include internal party documents, party campaign paraphrenalia, speeches by party officials, party press releases, party convention files, and more.

A national political party is distinguished from a constituency by the fact that a political party's main reason for existing (at least nominally) is to select and elect a slate of candidates to national office. Constituencies, on the other hand, usually exist to *influence* candidates and office-holders rather than select and elect them.

Two of the five parts of David Mayhew's definition of a "traditional party organization" [Mayhew, 19-20] apply to political parties in this sense:

(1) *It has substantial autonomy.* It is not the creation of, nor does its maintenance depend on the internal incentive structure of, a separate organization that operates mostly outside of electoral politics [...]

(4) *It regularly tries to bring about the nomination of candidates for a wide range of public offices.* The range ordinarily includes county, state assembly, state senate, and (often nonpartisan) municipal offices; sometimes judgeships; sometimes congressional and statewide offices. [...]

Political parties include (but are not limited to) the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Reform Party, the Libertarian Party, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Green Party. InBEs created by any wholly subsidiary organization formed by the party should be considered as being related to the party.

AI.2 Local constituencies

The Local Constituencies group contains InBEs related to the voting constituents who elect politicians to office. These InBEs include all voting records from all national elections, polls for national races, the constituent service files of congressmen, and more.

AI.3 Special-interest constituencies

The Special-interest Constituencies group contains InBEs related to the special-interest constituencies who donate money, prestige and volunteers to the election efforts of politicians, as well as InBEs related to all financial donations to campaigns for national political office. The constituencies covered here include (but are not limited to) labor unions, environmental groups, civil liberties groups, Chambers of Commerce, and political action committees (PACs) of all kinds. The InBEs they produce include posters and fliers, telephone records from phone banks, voter registration drive results, financial contribution records, lobbyist bills, and more.

AI.4 Political consultants

The Political Consultants group contains InBEs related to the guns-for-hire whom politicians hire to handle all or part of their election strategy. Strategies include (but are not limited to) advertising of all forms, canvassing, polling, data analysis, speeches, pranks, sabotage, and bribery. The InBEs consultants produce include campaign white papers, billing records, data analysis reports, videotapes of television advertisements, and more.

AI.5 Media

The Media main class contains InBEs related to the work of reporters and other news media employees in covering and reporting on national political campaigns. The work of reporters and other news media employees includes (but is not limited to) television and radio news broadcasts and talk shows, newspaper articles and columns, magazine articles and columns, and books. The InBEs the media produce are all of the artifacts mentioned in the previous sentence, as well as reporter notes, raw video and audio footage, and more.

AI.6 Regulatory and watchdog agencies

The Regulatory and Watchdog Agencies group contains InBEs related to the laws that regulate and bound the practice of American national politics, to the various interpretations of those laws that are enforced, and to the enforcement / muckraking agencies themselves. The InBEs that these agencies produce include laws and regulations, court cases, transcripts of hearings, findings of fact, and more.

Appendix II: Goehlert & Martin bibliographic classification

1. Nomination and Selection of Presidents
2. Primaries
3. Conventions
4. Campaigning
5. Candidates
6. Presidential Debates
7. Campaign Finance
8. Media Coverage
9. Political Parties
10. Electoral System
11. Redistricting and Reapportionment
12. Voting Participation

The Goehlert & Martin bibliographic classification works well for its intended purpose – to serve as an easily understandable classification for political science monographs and other works on American national politics from 1960 to 1996. Its subject headings are clear, and each corresponds to a well-defined and widely explored field of interest.

As a general classification system for American national politics, however, it falls short. Its main weakness is that categories 1-4 and 6 are really five aspects of the same thing – an election campaign – and all five should be joined into one category. It is also not exhaustive – for

example, special-interest and civic action groups are left out of the main classes entirely.

Appendix III: Bibliography

Acheson, D. (1955). *A Democrat looks at his party*. New York: Harper. A prominent Democrat (Acheson was Truman's Secretary of State for four years) provides a snapshot view of how Democrats classified themselves politically during the mid-1950s.

Barone, M. (Ed.). (1999). *The almanac of American politics 2000*. Washington, DC: National Journal. Provides an overview of national politics and national politicians, and is an excellent guide to what matters in national politics.

Birnbaum, J. H. (1992). *The lobbyists: How influence peddlers get their way in Washington*. New York: Random House. Birnbaum followed several individual lobbyists as they worked on Capitol Hill during the 101st Congress (1989-90), and gives an account of how and why lobbyists can influence legislation and help or hinder the re-election prospects of congressmen.

Brinkley, A. (1998). *Liberalism and its discontents*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University. A set of essays that examine the factions and rifts that have existed within liberalism during the 20th century.

Crouse, T. (1973). *The boys on the bus*. New York: Random House. An insider's view of how the press covers a national election campaign.

Goehlert, R. U. & Martin, F. S. (2000). *CQ's resource guide to modern elections: An annotated bibliography 1960-1996*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly. Contains more than 3300 short bibliographical abstracts about national elections, broken down into 13 categories and several dozen subcategories. This source is doubly useful: it provides both the abstracts of articles that might be useful, as well as a classification system for those abstracts.

Green, M. J. (1979). *Who runs Congress?* New York: Viking. An examination of how Congress works, which Congressmen have the most power within Congress, and how they have accumulated and retained that power.

Karp, W. (1973). *Indispensable enemies: The politics of misrule in America*. New York: Saturday Review. Karp argues that the two major political parties collude with each other in order to protect the power of each party's hierarchy and suppress populist revolts.

Key, V. O. (1964). *Politics, parties, & pressure groups*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell. A standard political science textbook that gives an overview of pressure groups, the party system, party structure and procedure, the electorate, and parties in the government.

Kristol, I. (1995). *Neoconservatism: The autobiography of an idea*. New York: Free Press. A book that chronicles one of innumerable examples of how political personalities, parties, and ideologies can change, join, and separate over time, making classification more difficult.

Larson, A. (1956). *A Republican looks at his party*. New York: Harper. The Republican version of the Acheson book, above.

Library of Congress. (1999). *Library of Congress subject headings* (22nd ed.). Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.

Luntz, F. I. (1988). *Candidates, consultants, and campaigns: The style and substance of American electioneering*. New York: Basil Blackwell. Luntz, a prominent pollster and political consultant, describes how political consulting works, and what consultants can and cannot do for the candidates who employ them.

Mayhew, D. R. (1986). *Placing parties in American politics: Organization, electoral settings, and government activity in the twentieth century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. A survey of the role that party organizations have placed (and not played) in each state of the United States during the post-Civil War period (but focusing particularly on the late 1960s).

O'Neill, T. (1987). *Man of the House: The life and political memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill*. New York: Random House. The political autobiography of the man perhaps most famous for the saying "All politics is local"; in part, a study of the role that good constituent relations play in a politician's career.

Phillips, K. P. (1975). *Mediacracy: American parties and politics in the communications age*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. Phillips explores the increasing role that the media would play in the emerging "post-industrial" American society of the late 20th century, and discusses how this increasing role (and the decreasing role of traditional forms of political engagement) would affect the shifting political alignment of the 1970s.

Ranganathan, S. R. (1967). *Prolegomena to library classification* (3rd ed.). Bombay: Asia Pub. House. Ranganathan's codification of his theory and terminology of classification.

Ranganathan, S. R. (1992, 19??). *Classification and communication*. Bangalore, India: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science. An overview of how Ranganathan's theory of classification fits into his theory of life.

Russell, F. (1976). *The president makers: From Mark Hanna to Joseph P. Kennedy*. Boston: Little, Brown. Russell goes into great detail about the role that various "kingmakers" have played in 20th century American presidential politics.

Sabato, L. J. (1981). *The rise of political consultants: New ways of winning elections*. New York: Basic Books. An acerbic overview of the world of political consultants and of how they affect American politics.

Schapsmeier, E. L. & Schapsmeier, F. H. (1981). *Political Parties and Civic Action Groups*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. An encyclopedia of the several hundred most prominent political parties and civic action groups in American history before 1980. Provides a sense of the breadth of groups that can be considered a part of national politics, and the variety of ways in which they involve themselves.

Solara, F. V. (1974). *Key influences in the American Right: A guide to sixty leading conservative, libertarian and anti-Communist organizations and publications in the United States*. n.p.: LEA Communications. An annotated index of every notable right-wing organization in the United States, accompanied by several pages of explanation about the ideological fissures that separated groups of organizations from each other.

Stanley, H. W., & Niemi, R. G. (1998). *Vital statistics in American politics 1997-1998*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly. A source for the kinds of information that are available about national politics, and the ways in which that information can be used.

Viereck, P. R. E. (1966). *Conservatism revisited*. New York: Free Press. Viereck argues for a conservatism that follows the European tradition that focuses on preserving the best of the past rather than the conservatism of William Buckley (which focuses on maximizing individual economic liberty) or of the John Birch Society (which focuses on xenophobia).