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Political Communication and Structural Equation Modeling: The Study of Process and Structure

Abstract

Political communication scholarship continues to expand its analytical capabilities in order to better address a broad range of theoretical questions that is reflective of a variety of research agendas. Joseph Cappella, Steven Chaffee, and a host of other distinguished scholars have argued repeatedly that the study of communication, no matter the context, is the study of process. One multivariate analytical technique that has grown increasingly popular of late among political communication scholars is structural equation modeling (SEM). This rise in popularity is due in large part to this analytical tool being particularly well suited to assess multiple processes of influence simultaneously. It is important to recognize that not only is SEM well suited to address some of the core questions that are driving the field, but the application of an SEM perspective to stale or dormant research questions and hypotheses can often times breathe new life into a research agenda. One fundamental principle of an SEM perspective is the concept of structure. Approaching a theoretical model from the standpoint of structure asks the researcher to view any and all relationships (and non-relationships) among variables as meaningful. In addition, a broader range of effects are analyzed (i.e., a decomposition of effects) when looking at a series of relationships among variables from a structural perspective. Finally, viewing a theoretical model as structure allows for clearer associations to form between the measurement of variables and the relationships that exist between variables. This presentation will focus on the study of political communication and how the use of SEM can aid and enhance the discipline.