

October 31, 1977

TO: Board of Overseers, NES
FROM: Lance Bennett, University of Washington
RE: Sears and Page memorandum.

The discussion memorandum prepared by Page and Sears raises a number of important questions that must be resolved if the next generation of behavioral research on elections can overcome some of the problems that have beset current work in the field. Since it would be impossible to address all of these questions in a short memorandum, I will talk about two that seem particularly important: how to go about constructing the political issues that we use on questionnaires, and how to generate more adequate definitions of "rationality." Both discussions argue for the increased use of field observation strategies and experimental investigations to validate and to generate survey measures.

What is an Issue?

One of the central problems in studying issue voting is the question of how to construct the issue stimuli on questionnaires. There is strong evidence that even minor variations in the wording and logical structure of survey items can affect not only the valence of attitude responses, but the measurable structure in both individual and mass responses. Thus, issue construction can affect the structure of responses, thereby making it difficult to differentiate cognitive structure from stimulus structure. (There is, of course, increasing evidence from research on information-processing and artificial intelligence that information formats and cognitive operations are closely related. More on this in a moment.)

The problems of issue construction and response measurement have raised serious questions about past interpretations of data. Earlier studies that demonstrated low consistency and stability in public perceptions of issues have been criticized on grounds that the imprecision of issue definitions and response formats invited meaningful variation in responses which, when analyzed, appeared as random variation (Asher, 1974; Achen, 1975; Jackson, 1975). Even the more recent studies showing an increase in voter sophistication (Nie and Anderson, 1974; Nie, et. al., 1976) have been examined critically as a result of changes in question wording and structure and the introduction of new response formats in the national surveys over time. Some critics (e.g., Bishop, et. al., forthcoming AJPS; Bishop, et. al., POQ forthcoming; and Sullivan, et. al., in progress) claim that almost all the observed increases in measures of cognitive structure are the artifacts of substantive and structural changes in stimulus items. If these two lines of criticism are sustained by further analysis of survey data and experimental work, they will raise questions even more serious than whether the interpretations of past studies have been correct. Underlying these criticisms is the troubling prospect that we simply have established no compelling standards for constructing political issues. Whether the voting public has demonstrated sophisticated cognitive operations in evaluating issues, and whether the quality of public thinking has changed, are really secondary questions. They cannot be answered until we have a better idea of how to construct realistic political issues. In addition to Converse's troubling suspicion that we often may measure "non attitudes," it seems that we face the equally annoying prospect that we have been soliciting responses to "non issues."

There are a number of ways to tackle this problem. For example, we might ask people to generate their own issues and then respond to them.

This solution would create a whole new set of problems. Beyond the obvious difficulty of analyzing "non comparable" responses, it is unclear how we could get the interviewers who administer surveys to provide the right inputs to trigger meaningful or complete sets of issues. A second strategy involves the development of a technique for "sampling" issues. This approach has received some serious attention, beginning with the work of Brunswick and Stephenson, and more recently with the work of Loevinger and Brown. However, there may be as many drawbacks to the idea of stimulus sampling as there are to the practice of allowing respondents to provide their own issues. It is clear that sampling the issues in even the most restricted political domains is a cumbersome and problematic affair. More importantly, the whole approach assumes that we can define and delimit a population of objects the membership in which seems determined only by the limits of language use, the scope of human imagination, and the creativity of political actors. The nature of this assumption seems to argue against setting the question up as a sampling problem.

Since we know some of the factors that affect responses to issues, we might consider some experimental designs that would at least identify the magnitudes of different effects. It doesn't take much imagination to think of some sound experiments that would provide good information on the effects of things like question wording, issue logic, the presence of supporting information, and time (historical change, memory decay, etc.) on attitude response and structure. However, it might be interesting to go beyond these initial formulations and translate these variables into forms that resemble more closely their roles in the real world. For example, one version of a "question wording" study might consider the difference in responses to raw issues as opposed to issues that contain a statement of rationale or purpose for the particular policy involved. It is clear that candidates and govern-

ment officials seldom just advocate a narrowly defined policy. They usually present the policy along with its rationale (often the rationale is emphasized over the policy). For example, during the Vietnam War, pollsters consistently got different responses depending on whether they asked for a response to a simple policy question (e.g. "American planes have been ordered to bomb military targets in Cambodia and Laos. Do you approve or disapprove of this action?") or whether they also included the government's rationale for the policy (e.g. "American planes have been ordered to bomb military targets in Cambodia and Laos because the administration regards these positions as a threat to our situation in Vietnam. Do you approve or disapprove of this action?"). The design of batteries of such experiments could be very helpful for determining both the factors that can affect issue perception and the magnitudes of these effects.

This approach, while helpful, still won't tell us which of these factors actually operate in an election. It also won't tell us whether the public structures its thinking about election issues in special ways (as a result of the stylized symbolization of these issues, the impact of party i.d. and candidate image on issue perception, or the necessity of distilling a multi-dimensional judgment into a single, crude form of expression: the vote). Both of these problems hark back to an earlier statement. I suggested above that it is difficult to differentiate cognitive structure from stimulus structure. This seems to be the crucial problem underlying issue construction. However, this problem may contain the key to its own solution. Much of the recent work in artificial intelligence and information processing (e.g., Abelson, Shank, Minsky, Bobrow, Collins, et. al.) suggests that we shouldn't separate cognitive processes from the nature of the stimuli that engage them. The thing that seems to account for the rapidity and elegance of human information processing

is the existence of a variety of cognitive routines that are geared directly to dominant forms of information presentation within various social domains.

It seems to me that an election constitutes a familiar and bounded social domain in which fairly standard forms for presenting the issues have evolved.

We should be able to determine with some reliability which potential voters are exposed to what kinds of issue stimuli and with what intensity. For example, we should be able to determine what the candidates say to special and general audiences. It should be possible to determine how candidate pronouncements are structured in terms of such "organizing devices" as campaign themes and slogans, traditional references to party, and attacks on opponents. Once we begin to identify basic informational formats in which campaign issues are communicated, we can define issues more confidently on questionnaires. Perhaps more importantly, we can begin to make better guesses about the cognitive operations employed by voters to judge the issues and the candidates. When we isolate some of the correspondences between cognitive structure and issue-format we can begin to think about the nature of voter rationality in different ways.

What Constitutes a Rational Voting Decision?

It seems to me that there are at least three problem areas in the study of rational voting through survey methods: 1) the proliferation of sensible, but diverse, definitions of the concept "voter rationality," 2) the underdeveloped understanding of how voters perceive candidate stands on the issues (this is accompanied by our equally thin understanding of what the structure and substance of these stands actually look like), and, 3) the unexplored linkages between rational choice as a cognitive process and rational behavior as an interpretable social activity within the symbolic context of a given

election.

The first problem is related to the frequent misfortune of many of our more sophisticated behavioral variables as they encounter the limits of face validation criteria. One way of looking at the concept of rationality is that it has been over researched and under theorized. A similar state of affairs has existed for a number of years with the concept of "ideology." There are at least five major approaches to the study of ideology. The early SRC studies defined an ideologue as someone who evaluated party differences on the basis of informed understandings about the policies that each party supported (Campbell, et. al., 1960; Converse, 1964). More relaxed definitions have expanded the bases of issue discrimination (Pierce, 1970). Other approaches regard ideology as an abstract philosophical system that guides concrete thinking and behavior (McClosky, 1964; Lane, 1962). Still other approaches measure ideology at both the abstract philosophical level and the concrete policy level (Free and Cantril, 1968). Finally, there is a growing trend toward measuring ideology largely as a cognitive structural variable at the individual level (Brown, 1970; Marcus, Tabb, and Sullivan, 1974). With the possible exception of the last approach, all of these notions of ideology make good common sense. That is, we can point to real world political situations in which people use each of these intellectual strategies to produce sophisticated political judgments. However, the various definitions yield different findings about the nature and distribution of ideology in the American public. For reasons that escape me, this has resulted in some considerable debate and confusion in the field. There seems to be more concern about which approach is best, or at least most realistic, than there is recognition that each perspective corresponds to some meaningful sense of ideology. The latter focus on the problem would suggest that we turn to carefully designed case studies and experiments on

political discourse and action in order to determine such things as: when a particular variant of ideology becomes employed in political contexts; whether or not people resort to different ideological forms at different times; and the degree to which different forms of ideological thinking can be substituted to yield similar understandings and guides for behavior.

The concept of "rationality" seems to be approaching (if it hasn't already reached) this state of affairs. The range of perspectives from Key to Converse (with a number of stops in between) is often discussed as though criteria could be discovered to permit choosing the one best definition of rationality. One suspects that there are as many meaningful usages of rationality in political contexts as there are sensible versions of ideology. If we shift our thinking to entertain this possibility, then there are at least two ways in which to proceed. First, we might adopt a "formal models" approach and specify a set of limiting assumptions, much as an economist would, and then describe the choice calculus of the political world defined by those assumptions. This approach, has, in fact, gained a considerable following in recent years. The advantage of this strategy is that it moves questions of validation to a more manageable plane. We are not concerned so much with whether we have captured the spectrum of realistic definitions of rationality in all their subjective complexity. Criteria of validation operate within the limits set by the formal assumptions of a given model. However, this moves us considerably away from the traditional behaviorist rationale that favors the explanation of ordinary social behaviors (like voting) in terms of their practical subjective antecedents. Behavioral research has generally operated under the rule that the assumptions underlying concepts and measurement criteria should be broadly reflective of the basic assumptions (whether conscious or unconscious) employed by social actors in practical circumstances. If this is still the goal in the study of the rational bases of voting choice, then it would seem that we need to

clarify our measures with the aid of careful observational and experimental work on the variety of sensible social definitions of political rationality and their various usages.

This sort of investigation would begin, no doubt, by confronting the second problem I mentioned above. If, as I suggested in the last section, we discover that rationality has something to do with common cognitive routines geared to various ways of presenting the issues, then we need to investigate how the issues are formulated in the first place. Following this, we could determine experimentally the variations in cognitive responses. We could also assess what issue-cognition packages produce what sorts of insights about the choice alternatives. Our models might become even more interesting if we supplement the issue format and voter exposure factors with such additional considerations as the information-seeking drives of voters and the effects of the media through which information is obtained. On these last points, for example, we know that most people regard their political information as that curious hybrid of partly visual, partly verbal input they receive from television (in fact, much information about campaign issues comes from the television commercials of the candidates themselves). In light of this, it would not be surprising to find that television oriented voters structure their thinking about the issues much more in terms of condensational images, broad themes, and visual images, than in terms of structuring devices (e.g., party platform, party record, or ideological calculations) that might be engaged by other sorts of candidate appeals through other information media.

These investigations into the varieties of choice processes that correspond to campaign issue formats and information media cannot give us, in and of themselves, conclusive evidence about the nature of rationality. They can expand our understandings about voter cognition and judgment, and this, in turn, may

trigger more interesting conceptions of rationality. However, in the end if we are to complete our picture of campaign issues and cognitive responses to them with an understanding of which of these responses are "rational," we must turn again to the dynamics of the electoral context itself. This involves the recognition that rational choice is both a psychological and a social process. This simply means that social actors calculate their behaviors both in terms of preference criteria and in terms of the instrumental impact a behavior can have within the ongoing social context. Some well reasoned actions may be rational or irrational depending on how they are interpreted in a particular situation. For example, a third party candidate must make it clear that a vote for him represents a special message to the "establishment" candidates regarding a particular set of issues or preferences. In 1968 Wallace made it clear that his supporters were using their votes to "send a message" to the Republicans and the Democrats. Without this explicit symbolic definition many Wallace voters might have found it difficult to translate their preferences into a certain losing cause. At least they might have found this difficult if they were concerned with making their votes count. A simple way of stating this is that principles of choice may complement, or they may compete with, the social definitions imposed upon a particular choice in a particular context. In this sense, it is just as "irrational" to carry out a logical and principled behavior in a situation that obscures the intention of the act, as it is to act in a way that brings undesirable and unanticipated consequences that could have been predicted. Conventional approaches to rational choice in voting have concentrated on the latter psychological aspects while largely ignoring the accompanying socio-symbolic component of rationality.

At first, it may seem impossible to include the symbolic definition of the voting act to our calculus of voter choice. However, the problem is no more complex than building models of thought and cognition. In many respects,

we have better information about the contextual factors that shape the "message value" of the vote. For example, we can determine what the candidates claim to represent. We can identify the most important public issues of the day. We know the past stability of voter alignments, and we can guess at the likelihood and causes of vote shifts and realignments. These and other bits of information about an election comprise a picture of the contextual factors that determine the "message value" of votes, blocks of votes and vote shifts in a particular election. Through the construction of these contextual factors we can develop much more sensitive questionnaire items to tap the complex calculations that enter a voter's choice. We can also begin to think about the electoral circumstances that suppress or enhance both rational thought and rational expression in politics. Just as there has been increasing support for Key's conclusion that voters do pretty well in light of what they are offered, we might begin thinking about the possibility that the vote represents, at best, an imprecise mechanism for communicating a choice. The precision of this form of political communication depends a great deal on the various symbolic contextual properties of each election in which it is expressed.

The above discussions of both the concepts of "issue" and "rationality" suggest that further theoretical developments in the areas of issue voting and choice processes in elections depend on the greater use of natural observation and experimental investigation as the foundations for the construction of survey instruments. The agenda for these studies must come from a general model of elections. An election can be seen as a political domain in which various information formats characterize issue definition. These formats may recur across elections and they may be utilized by candidates with varying frequency in a given election. These formats, in conjunction with the media through

which they are transmitted, engage various cognitive operations in the electorate. These operations may yield rational voting choices depending on: the degree to which the vote becomes perceived as a means of expressing a particular political preference, and the degree to which that preference can be expressed meaningfully in the symbolic context of a given election. In short, issues, cognitive operations, rationality, voting, and the structure of elections are all intimately related. The path to a more compelling theory of voter choice would seem to entail a more detailed exploration of these interrelationships.

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