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TO: The Board of Overseers
National Election Studies

FROM: George Bishop, Stephen Bennett,
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RE: Conference on Issue Voting

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As some of you may already know, our research group (with a grant from the National Science Foundation) has carried out a series of secondary analyses designed, among other things, to evaluate the effects of changes in question wording and format in the SRC/CPS election studies on observed trends in the structure of public policy preferences (i.e., attitude or issue consistency) as well as trends in the relationship of these preferences to individual voting decisions (i.e., issue voting). A large amount of evidence on this question is now in, and there appears to be little doubt that much of the reported increase in mass political sophistication from the fifties to the present period, as assessed by such indicators as the rise in issue consistency and issue voting, can be explained by question wording artifacts. We have documented many of these findings in several papers, copies of which are available to members of the Board.¹ So we will not repeat that information here, but focus rather on the implications of our work for data collection strategies in future CPS election studies.

Replication

The most obvious implication of our research efforts, and the one which we feel should be discussed extensively at the Stanford conference is that we must replicate. This does not mean that we should not develop new methods of assessing voters' cognitive processes and structures, about which we will have more to say shortly, but it does mean that if we want to study how these phenomena change over time, then I know of no other way in which we can do it with the existing survey datasets, without repeating, as exactly as humanly possible, the issue questions used in previous years. If we do not, we will be wasting a considerable resource and we will, in effect, be telling a whole generation of researchers to write off a significant period of our electoral history, namely, the late fifties and early sixties.

Which questions should be replicated and why is, of course, open to discussion. At this point, I will just briefly note that we will need to consider replicating not just the specific items that were used in earlier studies, but also the context of those questions, their order and their location within the interview schedule(s). Some readers may be inclined to dismiss replicating the earlier items on various technical and perceived "relevance" grounds, but a careful re-examination of these materials followed by some directed discussion will, I believe, result in some thoughtful reconsideration of their merits. In deciding if and what to replicate from previous SRC/CPS studies we will probably also want to explore questions about public policy matters that have been asked by other survey organizations in the past (e.g., AIPO, NORC, Roper), some of which have already been replicated in the NORC General Social Survey. Raising

this possibility should in turn, bring up the broader matter of whether and to what extent the CPS studies should function as a General Political Survey. If we decide to emphasize replication as one of our research strategies in future election surveys, then it is clear that, in the not too distant future (if not already) these demands will severely strain the temporal limits of our current interview protocols. And, in that case, we may want to consider various design options (e.g., randomized subsamples), including alternative data collection vehicles — e.g., combination and alternation with the NORC GSS.

One very important direction, then, in which we would like to see the conference move is to discuss the relative merits of replicating issue questions from previous SRC/CPS (and other baseline) surveys for the explicit purpose of monitoring change in the nature and structure of the American electorate's policy preferences.

Methodological Experimentation

There are a number of ways in which we can go about improving existing measures of the public's policy preferences including, of course, the development of new techniques. Needless to say, we can recommend some very specific methodological directions that have emerged from our secondary analyses, but they are far too numerous to delineate here. For example, we have in mind several controlled experiments which systematically manipulate such factors as the type and amount of filtering used with the issue questions, the context of the issue questions, the balancing of response formats in terms of popularity (or social desirability), order of presentation for dichotomous items, the use or non-use of middle categories

and the number of response alternatives. The effects of these factors on item variances and, in turn, on the magnitude of relationship between issue items and the vote need to be looked at very carefully if we are going to improve upon existing efforts. Merely adding new "pretested" items without knowing more about the properties of the old items will likely result in similar methodological problems in the future. What we're talking about here in a more important sense is good old-fashioned reliability and validity. How much do we really know about the psychometric quality of the various SRC questions that we all use so often? How many reliability (or validity) coefficients has anyone seen for any of these items — not just for the issue questions but for any of the political attitude measures? This is not a minor matter. If we are serious about improving the quality of these surveys, as I assume we are, then we will have to do more than just add a few new theoretical perspectives and measurement techniques to the current potpourri. We need, in other words, to sit down and think about whether we want to rigorously evaluate both the old measures and all proposed new measures. And this means more than just careful pretesting; it means longitudinal reliability studies of the test-retest variety, behavioral validation studies and other time-consuming, difficult tasks. We certainly need to talk about this, and decide whether we want to do what is required; and then tell the research community what we are or are not going to do and why.

In the same vein we need to discuss whether we want to take up, seriously, the oft repeated suggestion that we survey researchers develop "multiple measures" of our constructs. While it is true that we have significantly increased the total number of so-called "issue questions"

over the years, we have at the same time, because of cost and time constraints, limited ourselves usually to one question per issue. The vulnerability of such single measures to changes in meaning, as well as question wording, has been no more dramatically illustrated than by the collapse of the associations involving the SRC question (asked first in 1964) on whether the government in Washington is getting too powerful. We will also note in passing, that most of the literature on the declining influence of party identification in American politics is based on a single item: the 7-point Michigan question (or the 3-point Gallup item). How much of the change(s) described in the literature might be due to a change in the meaning of the category, "independent" — i.e., does it have the same connotations today as it did in the fifties? These are just a couple of examples, but the point should be clear: If we are going to improve the reliability of our issue measures, one way to do it is to multiply them. In this way we will reduce our vulnerability to some of the vagaries of opinion phenomena and increase our capacity to monitor political change.

No doubt the reader can come up with still other technical directions we might take, theoretically based or not (e.g., trade-off analysis of public policy alternatives, psychophysical scaling), but we would rather draw attention to some perhaps more fundamental problems. One such fundamental concerns how we go about determining not just the content and format of the issue questions used in the CPS studies, but all of the political attitude items. Much of it seems to be dictated by continuity with previous surveys (question wording deviations aside), some of it by the fads in issue concerns (usually among elites, including those in the survey centers) and still other parts of it by the interests of the

principal investigators. This is not particularly unique to the election surveys, but it does resurrect a long standing problem in public opinion and survey research and, that is, how do we go about selecting a representative sample of cognitions, beliefs, attitudes etc. concerning a given domain? In the absence of any wide-ranging formal theory to tell us what to look at, we go on constructing our surveys in much the same old haphazard fashion, cribbing an item here, inventing one there and then imposing our preferred frameworks on the respondents. The 7-point SRC issue scales are a good illustration of this. And while they may make us believe we are approximating interval-level measurement and getting more variance into our measures, they may only scratch the surface or miss entirely the way people structure their cognitions about the political world. What we need to do, then, is to develop or refine existing procedures (e.g., sentence-completion techniques) for obtaining more representative samples of respondent perceptions of the political environment, and then develop measures which reflect the nature and structure of those cognitions, much of which may have little to do with issue content as we have conceptualized it traditionally.

A related matter which we feel should be discussed, as well, is to devise a strategy for measuring the public's cognitions of the political environment outside the context of an election study. For as several recent commentators have noted, the whole study of issue consistency and issue voting has been founded largely on researcher imposed notions (largely the liberal-conservative continuum) of how issue positions and the vote should be related. Yet much research has shown that such

"ideological" terms have little meaning for much of the electorate, and more in-depth studies, such of those of Lamb and Lane have indicated that the political concerns of the mass public are not necessarily those which are salient at a more "elite" level. One possible remedy is to invest more resources in preliminary open-ended interviews (well in advance of the election) to identify the kinds of naturalistic dimensions respondents are using to organize their beliefs about various political objects. This is always easy to say, and we are well aware of the pitfalls inherent in this qualitative approach; however, we do not feel that this can any longer be justified as an excuse for not confronting the kinds of issues and problems raised by advocates of the approach.

We realize that in many ways our suggestions may appear to be at cross-purposes. On the one hand we are calling for replication of issue items while on the other, we recommend the development of completely new measures. Obviously we need to do both, though perhaps it will come down ultimately to making a hard choice between providing data for trend analysis and constructing a more accurate characterization of the present political universe. Or perhaps there is some other (innovative) method for stretching limited available resources to foster research on all these questions. Whatever their resolution, we feel that these are a few of the serious issues in issue voting which must be discussed at the conference.

FOOTNOTES

¹Bishop, G.F., Tuchfarber, A.J. and Oldendick, R.W. "Change in the Structure of American Political Attitudes: The Nagging Question of Question Wording." American Journal of Political Science (forthcoming); Bishop, G.F., Oldendick, R.W. and Tuchfarber, A.J. "Effects of Question Wording and Format on Political Attitude Consistency." Public Opinion Quarterly (forthcoming); Bishop, G.F., Oldendick, R.W., Tuchfarber, A.J. and Bennett, S.E. Continuities in the Structure of American Political Attitudes and Behavior." Paper presented at the Third Annual Conference of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, Chicago, Illinois, October 1977.