

Memorandum for  
Conference on Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes  
and Rational Choice

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In this memorandum, I want to make two principal arguments. First, it is desirable to include items in carefully defined policy areas on a regular basis. Second, it is desirable to interview activists as well as members of the general public.

The argument for the inclusion of items from particular policy areas is based on evidence that runs counter to the notion that some elections have been "issueless," or that major issues are properly treated as short-term forces that appear in one election and disappear by the next. Of course there is variation between elections. But if one looks at underlying dimensions in certain policy areas one can almost always find traces of opinion on the subject, and often find that these attitudes are significantly related to voting choice.

The policy areas that should be included are international involvement, economic management, social benefits, civil liberties, and--less consequentially, agriculture and natural resources. Table 1 gives an analysis of these issue areas based on responses to the 1972 open-ended sequence concerning parties and

Table 1

Issue Area	Issue Areas and Vote: 1972		
	Saliency % of total**	Partisan Advantage % Pro-Republican	Importance Probit Analysis M.L.E.
International Invol.	15.2	67.2	.26
Economic Mgt.	18.4	25.0	.22
Social Benefits	6.2	52.3	.19
Civil Liberties	4.2	61.2	.30
Agriculture	.3	33.3	*
Natural Resources	.1	28.6	*
General (Unspecific)	12.3	63.8	.41

\* - Maximum Likelihood estimate does not reach significance.

\*\* - Percentages donot sum to 100 because candidate and party categories have been excluded.

candidates together with a general category for issue comments that did not fall into a specific policy area. Data are given for salience, partisan advantage, and the relationship between attitude and vote choice.

Parallel analyses have been conducted for each presidential election since 1952. (The 1968 solution was restricted to Nixon and Humphrey voters.) The 1972 election produced the largest proportion of issue comments, but in fact the proportion of issue comments was rather narrowly bounded, varying only from 42.4% in 1956 to 56.7% in 1972. If the unspecific comments are excluded, the variation is greater. The low is 26.1% in 1960; the high is 44.4% in 1972.

Over the series of elections, generalizations can be made about the partisan advantage of each issue area. The unspecific comments always gave the advantage to the party that won that particular election. Otherwise, economic management was always to the Democrats' benefit, and social benefits and agriculture were in all but one election. Civil liberties helped each party in half of the six elections, and international involvement was a Republican advantage every time but 1964.

The general comments, and those about both economic management and international involvement, always occurred frequently (from 7.5% to 22.8% of the total comments for each of the three categories), and were significantly related to vote choice in all but one case. (International involvement barely missed significance in 1968.) Social benefits and civil liberties were usually of modest salience (1 1/2% to 6% of the total), and were significantly related to vote choice in about half of the elections. They did show considerable responsiveness to political stimuli. For example, in 1960 social programs were not questioned by either party. Comments were down to 1.5%, and the Maximum Likelihood Estimate was not significant. But with the Goldwater challenge four years later, the salience of this policy area increased sevenfold and the attitudes were significantly related

to vote. When we turn to agriculture and natural resources, we are down to trace elements. In the former, one can virtually see the disappearance of an issue area from the purview of a nationwide public. The N.L.E. was significant and high in 1952, dropped a bit in 1956, narrowly missed significance in 1960, and hasn't been important since. Comments about natural resources have been quite rare, and never significant. The argument for it as a separate policy area in a voting solution would rest on the possibility that it may become important as resource constraints become more apparent.

All this suggests that analyses based on the available pre-coded items have seriously underestimated both the magnitude and the continuity of interest in issues. (Consider the 36.1% and 32.1% of the total comments that could be assigned to specific policy areas during the "issueless" elections of 1952 and 1956.) Even more important, we have been missing the sophistication of voters in dealing with issues. They are distinguishing between policy areas according to their importance; they prefer different parties in different policy areas; their preferences are related to their votes.

If one can establish the existence and effects of these policy areas with open-ended data, then why is any change needed? The answer is that many other types of analysis require the standard metric that results from pre-coded questions. Correlations between issues are often employed as measures of constraint in belief systems. In any spatial analysis, whether factor analysis, elementary factor analysis, nonmetric multidimensional scaling or whatever, one must begin with a correlation matrix or a similarity matrix, and the nature of the items will control any substantive interpretation of the results. Estimates of proximity to candidates or parties require standard dimensions as do comparisons between positions taken by voters and positions taken by policy makers. Studies of perceptual accuracy have the same requirement. The policy areas are germane

to all these analyses, and we need pre-coded items reflecting the underlying dimensions of the policy areas are needed if this analytical potential is to be realized.

While I think it is essential to include pre-coded items from each of the policy areas, I would not argue in this memorandum for a particular question format. I do think that the single stimulus items such as were used in the Comparative State Election Project and the 1972 Hofstetter study have the advantage of greater certainty about the issues to which the interviewees are responding. The direct measures being applied by Lodge, Tursky and their Stony Brook colleagues have the advantage of permitting interval level statistical procedures. Both of these ought to be considered along with the options mentioned in the stimulus memorandum.

If new items are to be included, what should be excluded (or given lower priority)? First, we should dispense with the idea of a single underlying liberal-conservative dimension. Except as it provides a summary or gives us adjectives useful to describe direction, liberalism-conservatism masks more than it reveals. The modal voter in 1972 preferred the Republicans on international involvement, social benefits, and civil liberties, and the Democrats on economic management, agriculture, and natural resources. How liberal, or how conservative, was this modal voter? There is also strong evidence that liberalism-conservatism is a weak predictor. The 1968 Comparative State Election Project had a number of items on issues, and corresponding liberal-conservative items, all in proximity form. When both were included in general solutions for Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace, respectively, the betas for issue proximity were .58, .55, and .70. The betas for liberal-conservative proximity were .03, .06, and .03.

Lower priority should be given to evanescent issues, such as campus riots in 1970, that may be important in specific elections but do not have any continuing

effects. The same applies to style issues, such as women's role or marijuana, that reflect social concerns but tend to be on the periphery of politics.

Obviously, whether one wants to include items that reflect the headlines of the day and style issues or whether it is preferable to incorporate items based on central dimensions of the continuing policy areas is a fundamental question. A stronger case for the former can be made if one wants to focus on the voters' belief systems or explain the outcome of specific elections. A stronger case for the latter can be made one is interested in longitudinal analysis or linkages between the voters and political institutions.

In order to understand the analytical power the policy areas give to an exploration of linkages between citizens and political institutions, one must have some institutional data. One of the great ironies in the development of behavioral studies is that so few people have followed the 1958 lead of Miller and Stokes and interviewed political activists. There are exceptions, notably the committee studies and roll call studies in Congress, but it is generally accurate to say that we are drowning in data about the general public while we lack basic information about activists who are making crucial political decisions. This leads to the second general argument I want to make, that we should start interviewing activists even at the expense of giving up a few interviews with the general public.

My case here rests on an analysis of data on campaign activists. Our only nationwide study of those involved in presidential campaigns was the 1972 study directed by Richard Hofstetter which included parallel interviews with county leaders of the electoral parties and a mass sample. Space precludes any detailed description of the analysis\*, but we began with activists' response

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\* I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the contributions of two fine ABD's, Steve Shaffer and Steve Yarnell, who were responsible for much of this analysis, and thank Herb Weisberg for making some important modifications on the CLUSTER program.

to items from the policy areas and calculated agreement scores between every pair of activists. These agreement scores were used as input to a CLUSTER program. The results were such that each member of a resulting cluster had very high agreement scores with every other member. The unclustered activists did not have similar agreement scores with any other member. Thus, we had a blind procedure for determining party groups each of which was characterized by attitudinal consensus. We also found the isolates lacking allies in their own parties.

Some results of this analysis are presented in Table 2. In absolute terms, there is at least a dime's worth of difference between the parties. The Republicans tend to take moderate positions; the Democrats tend to take liberal positions. The Republicans are more unified than the Democrats on international involvement and economic management; the Democrats are more unified than the Republicans on social benefits and civil liberties.

In many respects, though, the relative positions of the groups within the parties are more interesting. There is a symmetrical pattern to the two party structures. In the Republican party, the dominant group (Group 1) takes positions more conservative than the party mean in every policy area, and the unclustered isolates have mean positions more liberal than the party mean in every policy area. The other groups take positions close to the dominant group with exceptions in specific policy areas. In the Democratic party, the dominant group takes positions more liberal than the party mean in every policy area, and the isolates have mean positions more conservative than the party mean in every policy area. The differences between the parties are that there are more Democratic groups, there is one Democratic group (3) more liberal than the dominant group in every policy area, one Democratic group (7) more conservative than the isolates in every policy area, and there are more Republican isolates.

Table 2

## Internal Structure of Political Parties

Attitude Group Number	Mean Position in Policy Area				% of Activists in Group
	International Involvement	Economic Management	Social Benefits	Civil Liberties	
Republicans					
1	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.0	29.8%
2	3.1	3.2	2.8	4.0	14.9
3	4.2	3.4	4.1	3.4	11.6
4	3.6	4.5	3.1	3.2	7.7
Unclustered	4.3	4.0	3.6	3.7	35.9
Democrats					
1	5.2	4.5	5.7	6.4	22.0
2	4.9	4.5	5.4	5.1	14.3
3	6.1	5.1	6.1	6.4	14.3
4	4.4	4.6	6.1	6.4	14.8
5	5.2	3.5	4.6	5.4	5.5
6	4.6	3.5	5.8	6.3	7.1
7	3.9	3.0	4.5	3.6	6.0
Unclustered	4.3	4.2	5.0	4.8	15.9

The scale for these scores has a range of 1 to 7. In general, a score of 1 would denote minimum use of government power or resources; 7 would denote maximum use.



This structure has consequences for the coalitions that can form. Here I'll use the Republican case because it's a little simpler. The dominant group can form different coalitions in various policy areas. In international involvement, it can coalesce with Groups 2 and 4 against 3; in economic management with 2 and 3 against 4; in social benefits with 2 and 4 against 3; in civil liberties, with 3 and 4 against 2. In each case, the dominant conservative group can form a coalition to overcome a more liberal opposing group. And, of course, the liberals are in a weak position to begin with. They are not only less numerous, but so many of them are isolates that they lack allies even among those whose general postures are similar to their own. The net of this is that in each policy area, the dominant Republican coalition is more conservative than the party mean. For parallel reasons, the dominant Democratic coalition in each policy area is more liberal than the party mean. This would hardly be obvious without studying the processes of aggregation within the parties.

These data also suggest where the strains are going to come within the parties. Here let's take a Democratic example. There is considerable agreement among Democratic groups on the desirability of social benefit programs, but there is a split among them in economic management. Consequently one has a potential split between Democrats who want welfare programs and are willing to spend to finance them, and other Democrats who want welfare programs but also want balanced budgets. The former could be personified by Hubert Humphrey, the latter by Jimmy Carter. Yet the existence of groups of Democrats supporting both postures implies that this contest would be present even if these leaders were not.

These data reveal much more about the parties than can be sketched in this memorandum, not least what the parties are not doing. If this can be discerned from 1972 data, why should more interviews with campaign activists have a high

priority? This is analogous to asking why Angus Campbell and Warren Miller should have wanted to spend more money on interviews with voters when they already had data from 1952. There is some reason to think our 1972 data are not unrepresentative even though these county leaders held positions in the Committee to Reelect the President and the McGovern-Shriver Committee. Some 90% of the Republicans and 83% of the Democrats reported previous political experience, and the analysis makes it possible to speculate on later political activity such as the struggle over Carter's H.E.W. budget. My guess would be that most of the groups will continue to exist within their respective parties, but their sizes would be altered somewhat. From what we've seen about the strategic advantages conferred by the ability to form coalitions, it would seem probable that relatively small changes in group strength could have magnified consequences for the positions taken by the party. But we don't know these things. Are the structures here identified lasting or did they exist only in 1972? If the groups continue to exist, how much change in the sizes of the various groups took place as one moved from a McGovern-led party to a Carter-led party? How much of the change in stance from 1972 to 1980 can be ascribed to changes in the internal structures of the party? These questions are central to an understanding of intra-party dynamics, but to address them we must have data.

A parallel case could be made for the need to interview actors in other institutional domains, whether legislative politics or executive politics or nomination politics. In each case, one could argue that the same policy areas should be used. The analysis of the internal structure of the electoral parties just sketched is the third instance in which a blind procedure has led to essentially the same policy areas. Aage Clausen's "Longitudinal Identity" analysis of legislative roll calls, my factor analysis of State of the Union Messages (later extended to platforms and campaign speeches), and this analysis

of attitudinal data of electoral activists all suggest the validity of these policy areas. Moreover, each study used a different analytical technique on a different type of data from a different institutional domain.

That these policy areas have been derived from institutional analysis, however, should call our attention once again to the fundamental choice involved. The policy areas focus on activity patterns of decision-makers, but these topics often are not central in the cognitive maps of the average citizen. To give but a single example, natural resources emerges as a separate policy area in executive politics, and environmental and energy questions have occupied a good deal of time in the Nixon, Ford, and Carter White Houses. Yet there is barely a whisper of concern with natural resources on the part of the general public. Therefore, if the focus our attention should remain on the electorate per se, or on voters as individuals, then much of this argument is moot. But if we want to understand the relationship between citizens and their political institutions, then we need to use the policy areas that bring analytical power to institutional politics, and we need interviews with political activists as well as interviews with citizens.