

TO: Professors Page and Sears  
FROM: Peter H. Lemieux, University of Rochester  
RE: Memorandum on Issue Voting Conference

Models of issue voting, whether based on positive theories of the voting decision or more empirical work such as The American Voter, have all typically been what I would call "proximity" models of the voting decision. All of these models share an assumption that an issue affects the individual voter's decision only when such an issue meets three tests: (1) that the issue is salient; (2) that the voter have a position on the issue; and (3) that the voter perceive the parties to differ in their positions on the issue. The theoretical prediction of such proximity models is that the voter will choose that party that he or she sees as closest to his or her position on the issue, assuming that the issue is salient to that voter. In my recent research on support for the British Liberal Party, I have argued that such a model of voting behavior fails to account for the issue-based Liberal support.

As an alternative, I would propose that many voters engage in what we commonly term "retrospective voting." Although scholars have concerned themselves with retrospective voting since Key's Responsible Electorate appeared a little over a decade ago, the theoretical underpinnings of this alternative view of the voting decision have seldom been fully explored. In my work on the Liberals, I have argued that the three conditions mentioned above that are commonly seen as prerequisites for proximity voting do not necessarily apply. If this alternative view is accurate, it has a number of implications for the types of questions we

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should ask of survey respondents in order to tap such behavior.

Key's analysis was based on observing a correlation between issue positions at the current election and defections from the party supported at the last election. Brody and Page have argued, correctly in my view, that it is impossible to disentangle issue-motivated defections from the "rationalization" of survey responses by respondents to be consistent with their behavior. Voters who "dress up" their responses to issue items to correspond to their voting choice, when indeed their choice is based on non-issue concerns, are indistinguishable from true policy voters. One possible solution to this problem would be the construction of a simultaneous-equations model including party choice and issue attitudes as joint endogenous variables. I have thought about this approach for a number of years now and have regretfully reached the conclusion that it is impossible to do such an analysis within a single cross-sectional design (pace John Jackson). The reason for this conclusion rests on the fact that I simply cannot think of exogenous variables which are related at only one point in time to only one of the endogenous variables (in terms of econometrics, the model is unidentifiable). One possible topic of discussion at the conference may be possible solutions to the identification problem through new questionnaire items or new designs.

However, an alternative approach exists to reducing the problems of rationalization for those voters who are truly motivated by retrospective evaluations of government performance. I would argue that the decision to change parties is really two theoretically separable decisions: one to desert the party previously supported, and a second to choose among the remaining parties for a new party to support. Such a view of the

decision to defect is much easier to analyze in multi-party systems such as Britain, of course, for in the United States, there is no other place to go (except out of the electorate, i.e., abstention, which I will consider as a party for the remainder of this memo). If you are willing to agree with me that the decision to defect is really two decisions, then let me add another assumption to this model. Recent work in social psychology has argued that negative evaluations of objects have a much more forceful effect on behavior than do positive evaluations. This line of argument has appeared in the political science context in the work of Kernell on mid-term Congressional elections, and of Bloom and Price on the relationship of economic conditions to voting behavior (on that subject, more later). If this line of argument is accepted, it suggests that the forces driving a voter away from a party he dislikes may be much more important than the forces drawing him to the opposition. As a result, this "retrospective-negative" model of the voting choice would predict that the position of the party currently chosen need not necessarily bear any relationship to the voter's attitudes, but that his or her attitudes should be in conflict with the position of the party previously supported.

Clearly such a model of the voting decision is directly at variance with the proximity model discussed at the outset of this memo. I would admit that, taken to the limit, this model suggests that voters do not compare parties and candidates when deciding how to vote. For high-information elections like American Presidential contests, such an assumption is probably untenable. In low-information elections, such as mid-term Congressional contests, or primary elections, the retrospective-negative model may more closely approximate the true relationship between issues and voting.

Such a model also suggests an alternative view of the rationalization problem. It is quite possible that the voter would "project" his or her issue attitudes onto the party he or she is newly supporting. Because the operative process is primarily that driving the voter away from his or her previous choice, he or she may be ignorant of the issue position of the party now being supported. It is perfectly reasonable to expect, given processes of attitude consistency, that the voter may perceive the new party to hold the position he or she holds, whether correct in that perception or not. In that sense, rationalization would be operating. Yet I would argue that the voter is not behaving irrationally. There are information costs involved in determining the correct position of the parties, especially since parties have strong theoretical reasons to behave ambiguously, and such ambiguous behavior has been demonstrated to occur empirically. If the only criterion for the decision to defect is conflict on issue position, there is no reason to require the voter to incur those costs. Projection with regard to the party being supported would thus represent a perfectly rational way of coping with uncertainty. However, a rational voter by this argument must still perceive correctly that the party of origin holds a position in conflict with his or her own.

Thus the "retrospective-negative" model of voting choice yields the following set of testable empirical predictions:

- 1) The voter's position on an issue should be in conflict with the espoused position of the party he or she previously supported.
- 2) In a number of cases, the voter's position on an issue should be expected to conflict with the espoused position of the party he or she currently supports.
- 3) The voter should correctly perceive the position of the party now being supported.

- 4) The voter need not correctly perceive the position of the party now being supported.

I have tested these predictions against British data in studying Liberal Party support, and they were uniformly supported. Of course, the Liberal Party is an ideal candidate for projection since most voters have no idea where they stand. I would like to test this model comparatively in the American context, preferably in the 1978 Congressional election, where, as argued above, retrospective-negative voting is theoretically more likely to occur. The attached Appendix lists some possible questionnaire items designed to measure such retrospective-negative voting.

Concern with the role of performance evaluation in voting choice has led me naturally to the literature on economic determinants of political behavior. Although some scholars have argued that there is no relationship between economic conditions and voting (Stigler; Arcelus and Meltzer), the bulk of the evidence seems to suggest that such a relationship does exist. Scholars in this field seem to have reached the consensus that attempts to analyze this relationship with aggregate data, as Kramer did, have gone about as far as they can with the limited number of data points available, and that any further research must concentrate on the individual voter's decision using survey data. While the CPS questionnaire has in the past included a number of items related to economic questions, I would argue that these questions are unable to tap important components in the economic conditions/voting behavior relationship.

American voting behavior scholars seem to take the view that the economy is primarily a valence issue. Implicit in this notion is the assumption that the effects of changing economic conditions more or less impinge on all voters the same way. I believe, along with a number of other scholars, that the economy is more accurately characterized as a position issue, unless some overriding economic problem arises. For instance,

it is not surprising to discover that in 1974, when the British economy was in disastrous shape with 20-25% inflation, most of the British public saw inflation as the most important economic problem. Yet in times of more economic stability, it seems more reasonable to assume that class interests should correlate with attitudes on proper economic policy. Thus, for example, the belief that inflation is more important than unemployment turns out to be strongly related to income in the SRC Economic Behavior surveys. The questionnaire items on CPS surveys do not permit equivalent kinds of analysis because they simply ask the respondent whether or not the government is doing a good job in fighting unemployment or inflation. In a sense, such a question is "too easy" for the respondent; he or she is not forced to make hard choices between a high inflation/low unemployment policy package and a low inflation/high unemployment package. Yet we should expect theoretically that voters in different economic positions should evaluate such packages differently given their own circumstances, and that these differences in evaluation should affect their voting choices differently as well. I have proposed a schedule of questions in the Appendix which I would argue tap these conflictual components in evaluation of economic conditions better than the CPS items.

Also included are a number of questions designed to tap better the respondent's own economic position with regard to unemployment and inflation. Such questions are crucial if we are to understand the relationship between perceptions of economic conditions and individual voting behavior. Once again, past CPS questions have been posed in a relatively non-threatening way, asking the respondent simply to evaluate how well or how poorly he or she has done over the past twelve months and to project how well or poorly he or she will do over the next twelve months. The argument

presented above suggest that such questions are also "too easy" in the sense I described. In addition, it is impossible to understand what a respondent means by "better" or "worse." It would be interesting to see whether or not such terms in fact reflect true changes in real income. A respondent whose income increases by 5% in a year where inflation is 10% clearly should respond to economic conditions differently than one whose income increases 5% relative to a 1% rate of inflation. It would be useful to include contextual material, perhaps available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, on regional rates of unemployment and inflation in order to view the setting in which the respondents answer survey questions on economic performance.

Finally, I have included a set of questions designed to tap attitudes on income distribution and tax policy in relation to such distribution. Discussion of tax loopholes reverberated throughout the 1976 campaign, and it would have been useful to see whether or not respondents viewed themselves as advantaged or disadvantaged by the tax system. Also, given what we think we know about the relative progressivity and regressivity of local, state, and Federal tax structures, it would be quite interesting to see whether or not respondents concerned about the fairness of the tax system tend to focus on the local, state, or Federal level.

This memo is already too long. I have enumerated a number of areas in which I think important contributions to the study of issue voting can be made. Now the next step is to get the data so we can do the research.

APPENDIX

I. Questions relating to retrospective voting.

Considering now the Federal Government, which of the following do you think is most responsible for government policy?

1. The President
2. The Federal Bureaucracy
3. The Congress
4. The Supreme Court

Thinking now just about the Presidency, which of the following do you hold most responsible for policy matters?

1. The President himself
2. The President's party

When you decide to vote in a Presidential election, in considering the President, which do you take most into account?

1. The President's record in office
2. Both about equally
3. The President's campaign promises and platform

When you decide to vote in a Presidential election, in considering the candidate opposing the President, which do you take most into account?

1. The record of the challenger's party when his party was in office
2. Both about equally
3. The challenger's campaign promises and platform

When you evaluate how well the President has done, which of the following is most important to you?

1. The good things he has done
2. Both about equally
3. The bad things he has done



II. Questions relating to political economy.

Suppose the Government had to choose between a policy reducing unemployment but allowing prices to rise, and a policy of keeping prices steady but allowing unemployment to increase, which do you think the Government should choose?

1. Reducing unemployment
2. Keeping prices steady

How important do you think it is to (reduce unemployment, keep prices steady--respondent's choice above)?

1. Very important
2. Somewhat important
3. Not very important

Which party do you think would be more likely to follow a policy of reducing unemployment even if it meant letting prices rise--the Democratic or Republican Party--or would they be about the same?

1. Democratic
2. No difference
3. Republican

Which candidate do you think would be more likely to follow a policy of reducing unemployment even if it meant letting prices rise--the Republican or the Democrat--or would they both be about the same?

1. The Republican candidate
2. The Democratic candidate
3. No difference

Which party do you think would be more likely to follow a policy of keeping prices steady even if it meant having more unemployment--Democratic or Republican--or would they be about the same?

1. Democratic
2. No Difference
3. Republican

Which candidate do you think would be more likely to follow a policy of keeping prices steady even if it meant having more unemployment--the Republican or the Democrat--or would they both be about the same?

1. The Republican candidate
2. The Democratic candidate
3. No difference

Who do you think most benefits from a policy of full employment?

Who do you think most benefits from a policy of price stability?

Over the past year, have you ever been unemployed? If so, for how long?

Over the past year, have any of your relatives or friends been unemployed?  
If so, do you know for how long?

Over the past five years, have you ever been unemployed? If so, for how long?

Over the past five years, have any of your relatives or friends been unemployed? If so, do you know for how long?

Considering the next twelve months, how likely do you think it is that you will be unemployed?

1. Very likely
2. Somewhat likely
3. Not very likely

Considering the next twelve months, how likely do you think it is that someone you know will be unemployed?

1. Very likely
2. Somewhat likely
3. Not very likely

Do you think the Government is doing all it can to reduce unemployment?  
If no, what else do you think it should be doing?

Do you think the Government is doing all it can to keep prices steady?  
If no, what else do you think it should be doing?

Over the past twelve months, has the overall income of your family increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

If increased, how much would you say it has increased?

1. Less than 2%
2. 2-4%
3. 4-6%
4. More than 6%

If decreased, how much would you say it has decreased?

1. Less than 2%
2. 2-4%
3. 4-6%
4. More than 6%

Suppose the Government instituted a policy of proving a "floor" of income for everybody and would give people money if they fell below that floor. Thinking about a family of four people, what would you think such a floor should be?

1. \$0, Government shouldn't do that
2. \$1-999
3. \$1000-1999
4. \$2000-2999
5. \$3000-3999
6. \$4000-4999
7. \$5000 or more

Do you think the current tax system treats people like you:

1. Very fairly
2. Pretty fairly
3. Pretty unfairly
4. Very unfairly

Why?

We've heard a lot about tax "loopholes" this year. Do you think that the tax system contains a lot of "loopholes?" If yes, who do you think most benefits from them?

Considering now the various places to which you pay taxes, which of the following do you think treats you most fairly?

1. The Federal Government
2. Your state government
3. Your local government

Which do you think treats you most unfairly?

Considering all the taxes you pay, have your total taxes increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past five years?

If increased (or decreased), which of the following has increased (decreased) the most?

1. Your Federal taxes
2. Your state taxes
3. Your local taxes

Which of the following do you think wastes the most of your tax dollars?

1. The Federal Government
2. Your state government
3. Your local government
4. None of the above

Which do you think wastes the least?

1. The Federal Government
2. Your state government
3. Your local government
4. All waste about the same

Which of the following do you think provides you with the most services for your tax dollar?

1. The Federal Government
2. Your state government
3. Your local government

Which do you think provides the least?

When you filed your Federal income tax last spring, did you itemize your deductions or did you take the standard deduction? If itemized, do you think that there were some things that you declared that shouldn't be deductions? If so, what? If itemized, do you think there are some expenses that are not permitted that should be permitted? If so, what?