

Memorandum of Interest

Conference of Issue-Voting, Rational Choice and Information Processing

It seems to me that we have paid insufficient attention to the short term time dimension regarding issue voting. Although the CPS pre and post election interviews typically span a period of 60 to 90 days, much of our analysis of issue voting presumes that the perceptions of issues of those voters interviewed toward the beginning of the time period closely resemble those of voters interviewed toward the end. Moreover, when comparisons of the importance of issues are made between elections, we usually ignore whether or not the issues under consideration were asked about during the pre-election or post election interviews. For instance, the question of the most important problem that government should handle was asked before the elections of 1964 and 1968, but after the elections of 1972 and 1976.

Politicians, of course, campaign as though they have made the opposite presumption. In contrast to political scientists they apparently believe that the relative concern that voters have for particular issues and the opinion that voters have about those issues can change over the course of an election campaign. It is hardly accidental that Henry Kissinger announces peace is at hand just before election day in 1972; or that a black preacher tries to integrate Jimmy Carter's parish church in Plains, Georgia on the last weekend of the 1976 campaign. Nor are John F. Kennedy's letter of support to the jailed Martin Luther King, Lyndon Johnson's retaliatory raids stemming from the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Hubert Humphrey's sudden call for new peace initiatives in Vietnam, or Gerald Ford's surprise challenge to a revival of the great debates without apparently intentional--and issue-related--electoral consequences.

In the post election period, politicians also act as though they can influence voters' opinions about the issues of the past campaign. Not only are winning politicians quick to interpret the "mandates" they have just received from the voters, but many are ready to set forth new programs to meet newly discovered policy problems. By early January, a President-elect will have selected his principal advisors and cabinet officers, and he will be hard at work on his inaugural address and several major statements on policy which he must deliver to Congress. Certain portions of the programs being contemplated will be released as "trial balloons", and by the end of January the major priorities of the new administration will have been set forth publicly.

To the extent that the politicians are correct about their abilities to influence public opinion, the longer CPS interviewers remain in the field, both before and after the election, the more likely that voters' perceptions of the importance of issues and their opinions about those issues will change. To some extent, of course, the amount of change over time in the pre and post election interview periods can be checked after the fact. For instance, the distributions of opinions on specific issues, the judgments of the most important problems government should handle, and the open-ended statements of the likes and dislikes of candidates and parties can be compared from week to week or over some other appropriate interval of time. (I am beginning work on this, and I expect to have some data regarding short term variations in issue perceptions and opinions by the time of the January conference). But if time of interview is an important variable for determining both the issues to which voters pay the most attention and the opinions that voters have on those issues, then the CPS study design should take time of interview into account.

In particular, it would seem feasible to schedule the field work so as to obtain interviews over predetermined successive time periods such that those interviewed within each time period constitute a representative subsample of the entire sample. Secondly, it would also seem advantageous to reinterview a subsample of respondents just before the election and just before the end of the last post election time period in order to obtain another estimate of the changes, if any, that occur during the campaign and in the subsequent three months. Finally, as most citizens get their day to day information about politics from television newscasts, it would seem advisable to systematically monitor the major political news items reported in the national network newscasts over the entire interview period.

At any rate, it seems to me that a thorough consideration of short term effects on issue perceptions and opinions is in order before CPS planners move to design more sophisticated techniques for measuring issue-voting and related aspects of voter rationality.