MEMORANDUM FOR

CONFERENCE ON ISSUE VOTING, COGNITIVE PROCESSES

AND RATIONAL CHOICE

John B. McConahay

Duke University

There are two aspects of issue voting that I would like to see addressed more thoroughly and with a somewhat different methodology than previously. First, does the individual calculate the impact upon himself or herself of a policy outcome of an issue? (What's in it for me or how does it effect me?) And if the voter makes this calculation, how is it done? Second, does the voter link his or her outcome preferences (regardless of how the policy preference was chosen) to a voting decision when the individual must vote for specific candidates? And if the voter makes this linkage, how is it done? Neither concern is new or unique, but I want to suggest methodological changes that might enable us to develop more precise mathematical models derived from cognitive social psychology.

Personal Impact, Self-interest and Policy Preferences:

Economic theories of politics (Downs, 1957; Buchanan & Tulloch, 1962) and the dominant psychological theories of politics (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1964) have stressed "primitive self-interest" at the expense of ideology in influencing political behavior. And at the aggregate level, there is a great deal of empirical support for this approach (Kramer, 1971; Tufte, 1975). Yet, in at least some elections having racial factors, individual level analyses have found a very minimal impact

of personal self-interest upon voters' decisions and a major impact of ideological or value factors (Sears & Kinder, 1971; McConahay & Hough, 1976).

The empirical issue here is not voter rationality. It is no less rational to maximize one's less tangible social (or racial) values than to maximize any other utility such as one's property, income or other economic values. The empirical issues have to do with when personal self-interest and convenience influence the voter's policy preference and how does the voter calculate his or her self-interest and link it to the preferred policy. It may be that voters always think that they are choosing the policy outcome that is in their economic or other personal interests, but errors in information processing lead them to have preferences that are opposite or orthoganal to their personal interests. (See Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, for a discussion of the differences between what people "think" influenced their behavior and what "really" did.) Though it was once thought that people could make good assessments of uncertain outcomes and events (Peterson & Beech, 1967), cognitive psychologists are no longer so optimistic (Slovic, Fischoff & Lichtenstein, 1977).

The Link Between Policy Preferences and Candidate Choice:

Except in referenda, policy preferences on an issue cannot be expressed directly in a vote. The voter must decide between or among candidates and choose the one or ones perceived most likely to bring the voter's policy preference into reality. And, except in the case of single issue voter choosing from among single issue candidates, there must be some weighting process across issues and across candidates. This is common knowledge,

and the CPS surveys have made attempts to get at these weighting processes for a number of years.

In recent years, social psychologists have proposed various mathematical models for linking attitudes and beliefs to behavior based more or less directly upon Bayesian probabilistic concepts (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975; Wetzel, 1976; Slovic, Fischoff & Lichtenstein, 1977). Most of the empirical work on these theories has used college students rather than national samples. However, I think it is desirable to attempt to apply these theories to voting choices because they are potentially more precise than existing models. To do so, however, we shall need to change the response format of many of the survey items presently in use.

Probabilistic Assessments of Issues and Candidates:

For the purposes of this brief memorandum, the nuances of the various probabilistic choice models need not be explicated. To choose among them or reject all of them cannot be done at this time with the usual seven or five point agree-disagree response format used for most issue items and good job-poor job (better-worse) response format used for the candidate perception items.

I propose, therefore, two changes in item format. First, that in every instance where it is possible to change the response format without changing the exact item wording (only the instructions), respondents be asked to give an estimate running from zero to one hundred percent of the likelihood that an item is true. For example, the F3 and F4 series of items in the 1976 CPS Pre-election survey could be phrased in terms of "How likely (or what are the odds) that Ford, as President could be trusted?"

Similarly, in addition to asking people for whom they intend to vote, they should be asked to assess the likelihood that they will vote for Ford, then the likelihood that they will vote for Carter and then the likelihood that they will vote for someone else.

The second change in item format would involve getting assessments of respondent's subjective probabilities of certain events (the base rates) and their perceptions of conditional probabilities. For example, to start on the problem of self-interest calculations, one might ask:

1) "What is the likelihood that there will be busing in your town (neighborhood)?"
2) "What is the likelihood that you will be opposed to busing?"
3) "If there is busing in your town (neighborhood), what is the likelihood that you will be opposed to busing?"
4) "What is the likelihood that Candidate X can stop busing in your town (neighborhood)?"
5) "If Candidate X could stop busing, what is the likelihood that you would vote for him (her)?"
6) "If Candidate X could not stop busing, what is the likelihood that you would vote for him (her)?"

These items are a first pass for illustrative purposes only and they do not have to be asked consecutively nor in that order.

There are at least three cautions that need to be raised with regard to this proposal. First, if the response formats of certain standard items are changed, it would disrupt their historical continuity and make it impossible to assess long term trends accurately. Therefore, certain standard items (e.g. the efficacy or trust items) should not be altered

or they should be asked in both formats. In recent research I did in Louisville, Kentucky, I had respondents use two different response formats for the same items and they were able to do it.

A second caution, is that it sometimes takes extensive training to get college students to give responses in terms of probabilities or likelihood or odds (Wetzel, 1976). However, they can learn to do it and the kinds of assessments called for in the laboratory studies are usually more complicated than what is proposed here. Obviously, this is an empirical question that requires small scale pilot testing before a decision for massive changes is made.

The third caution, as in all correlational/cross-sectional research, we cannot be certain that obtaining the predicted mathematical relationship between policy preferences and preferred candidates resulted from issue analysis leading to candidate choice. Hence, some form of panel study or field experiment will be necessary.

The changes in format proposed do not depart radically from the past, the feeling thermometer also uses a form of 100 point scale, for example. Furthermore, the usual data analysis procedures such as multiple regression or simultaneous equation estimation could still be used. However, it would also permit analyses heuristic models based upon Bayesian type information processing models.

References

Buchanan, J. M. & Tullock, G. The calculus of consent. Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan, 1962.

Campbell, A.; Converse, P. E.; Miller, W. E. & Stokes, D. E. The American voter (abridged ed.). New York: Wiley, 1964.

Downs, A. An economic theory of democracy. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.

Fishbein, M. & Azjen, I. Beliefs, attitude, intention and behavior. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975.

Kramer, G. H. Short-term fluctuations in U.S. voting behavior, 1906-1964. American Political Science Review, 1971, 65, 131-43.

McConahay, J. B. & Hough, J. C., Jr. Symbolic racism. Journal of Social Issues, 1976, 32(2), 23-45.

Nisbett, R. E. & Wilson, T. D. Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. Psychological Review, 1977, 84, 231-359.

Peterson, C. R. & Beach, L. R. Man as an intuitive statistician. Psychological Bulletin, 1967, 68, 29-46.

Sears, D. O. & Kinder, D. R. Racial tensions and voting in Los Angeles. In W. Z. Hirsch (Ed.) Los Angeles: Viability and prospects for metropolitan leadership. New York: Praeger, 1971.

Slovic, P.; Fischhoff, B. & Lichtenstein, S. Behavioral decision theory. Annual Review of Psychology, 1977, 28, 1-39.

Tufte, E. R. Determinants of the outcome of midterm congressional elections. American Political Science Review, 1975, 69, 812-26.

Wetzel, C. G. A bayesian analysis of actor and observer attributions of causality. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1976.