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To: Board of Overseers, National Elections Studies

From: David RePass

Subject: Memorandum of interest in the conference on Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes and Rational Choice to be held at Stanford University in January 1978.

As you probably know, I have been working in this area of voting research for a number of years. In addition to my published articles in the APSR ("Issue Saliency and Party Choice" and "Political Methodologies in Disarray: Some Alternative Interpretations of the 1972 Election"), I have also written "Levels of Rationality Among the American Electorate", a paper presented at the 1974 APSA convention. In the process of this research, I have addressed a great many of the questions raised in the Sears-Page memorandum. Indeed, I feel I have answered quite a few of those questions, or at least presented approaches for answering them. (I am sending a copy of the "Levels of Rationality ..." paper directly to Sears and to Page in case they have not seen it.) I might add that my PhD dissertation was an extensive analysis of the question raised on page 8 of the Sears-Page memorandum — the perceptual and attitudinal linkages between economic events and voting behavior. I have used the SRC/CPS national election studies for most of my research, and thus I am very familiar with the capabilities and limitations of these instruments to deal with issue voting, cognitive processes and rational choice.

Although I have a number of specific recommendations to make concerning question format, new wording, additions and deletions of items in the CPS election studies, I will not clutter this memo with that kind of nitty-gritty; such specifics should come during or after the conference, once broader theoretical problems have been discussed. Let me here make some general observations about some of the points raised in the Sears-Page memorandum.

Evaluation of the Candidates

First, the focus of the conference seems to be on issue voting or policy voting; yet the conference title includes the term "Rational Choice". In recent years, political scientists have all too often equated "issue" voting with "rational" voting. As I have pointed out in my paper on "Levels of Rationality ...", voting on the basis of issue concerns is not the only way a rational choice can be made. Surely, knowledge about the qualifications of candidates is also an important ingredient of rational choice. The political skills, leadership abilities, trustworthiness, intelligence and other such qualities of candidates may be even more important for voters to judge than the stands candidates take on particular, often transient, issues of the day. Thus, I believe that we should include evaluation of candidates as one of the topics to be considered at this conference.

The meaning of "Rational Choice"

This raises an even larger question concerning the organization of the conference. The term "rational choice" means quite different things to different political scientists. There are those political scientists (in the Riker-Ordeshook school of thought) for whom "rational choice" implies formal, deductive (positive) models; there are those political scientists in an older, more traditional school of thought who interpret "rational choice" to mean informed, reality-based voting. (I put myself in the latter school.) I foresee great difficulty in reconciling these two schools of thought. Perhaps one of the purposes of the conference could be to bring scholars from these two schools together and see if there is any way to satisfy both of their needs in the same survey instrument. But in order to keep things straight, I would certainly recommend avoiding the use of the term "rational choice" at this conference since the term

has such diverse referents. Perhaps the terms "formal or positive models" and "information-based voting" could be used instead.

Capability for identifying individuals who follow different choice models

No matter what models of voting choice we might decide to test, it is important to keep in mind that not all voters will fit any one model. Some will vote on the basis of blind allegiance to party, others will be quite fully informed about the issues and candidates, others might even have developed a Pareto-optimal calculus, etc. etc. Any survey instrument that we develop should allow us to identify that subset of voters who base their choice on any one of the proposed models.

Much of the recent literature on issue voting and ideological voting has used aggregative methods (i.e., correlation coefficients, factor analysis and the like) to measure the extent to which issue voting or ideological voting is present among the electorate. It would be much more appropriate, and certainly more accurate, to use individual-level analysis. How many voters consider issues in making their choice? How many are ideologues? How many vote on the basis of party identification only, etc? Correlation coefficients and regression coefficients (beta weights) can, at best, tell us the general importance of a given variable, in aggregate, across the entire electorate, but cannot tell us how many individuals were thinking in certain ways or being moved by certain forces. The assumption often made when we see a beta weight or a factor loading is that a certain variable affected all voters (on the average) to such-and-such extent. The variable in question (say an issue) may have been important to a large or to a relatively small proportion of voters -- we cannot tell from the aggregate coefficient.

In my "Levels of Rationality ..." study, I made an assessment of the relative importance of issues, candidates and party identification in the decision of each individual voter. (I subsequently validated this assessment through the use of multiple regression analysis with very gratifying results — multiple R's in the range of .95.) However, the method I employed in that study — reading through the verbatim responses to all open-ended questions — was quite intuitive and subjective (to say nothing of being laborious). Some other method should be found to measure the importance of various factors in individual voting choice.

Some years ago, Michael Shapiro did design a questionnaire that attempted to measure importance to each respondent of issues, candidates and party identification. He also measured loss-functions. (See his article "Rational Political Man: A Synthesis of Economic and Social-Psychological Perspectives", APSR December 1969.) Although I am highly skeptical about asking respondents to analyse themselves, as Shapiro did, perhaps his methods are worth looking into as a beginning to an exploration into methods of weighing components of individual voting decisions.

There is much more to say, but let me close here. Further commentary will depend on how the conference unfolds.