

November 13, 1977

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies
FROM: William Schneider, Harvard University
RE: Memorandum of interest for the conference on
"Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes, and Rational Choice"

I. Theoretical concerns

I have been using data from the CPS American national election studies, plus similar surveys from Britain and West Germany, to construct a typology of issues based on two characteristics: divisiveness, and the quality of choice offered by the parties and candidates on each issue. Treating these two characteristics as dichotomies, one can construct the following typology:

		QUALITY OF THE ISSUE	
		Divisive	Non-divisive
QUALITY OF THE CHOICE	Partisan Direction Clear	A	B
	Partisan Direction Unclear	C	D

"Divisiveness" corresponds to the position-valence distinction first developed by Stokes -- whether an issue expresses values about which there is legitimate disagreement, or whether an issue expresses only one generally accepted value, positive or negative. Partisan direction relates to the perceived clarity of choice between the major parties and candidates.

Issues of Type A are the basic partisan issues which define the substance of the underlying party alignment. Issues of Type B are short-term forces which may cause election results to deviate from the basic partisan alignment -- or, in British usage, "swing." In The Responsible Electorate, Key was primarily concerned with a subset of Type B issues, namely,

retrospective judgment of the performance of the incumbent administration. Type B issues do not raise alternative values. But this absence of "positions" does not preclude substantive debate. There is usually debate over the salience of these issues, the assignment of responsibility, and the differentiation of parties and candidates in terms of competence. Type B issues tend to dominate campaign rhetoric and give rise to substantial movements of voters. But the absence of polarization and group identification ("us" versus "them") on these issues means that their effects are predominantly short-term, i.e., "swing," not realignment.

Type C and Type D issues are characterized by confusion over party and candidate choice. This absence of clarity is usually not attributable to inherent cloudiness in the voters' minds. Most often, it is the parties and candidates who refuse to take clearly defined positions, or else their positions are not believed by the voters. Type C issues are at the core of the realignment process. They cut across party lines and often give rise to major protest movements. The 1968 U.S. Presidential election is the most striking example. A protest movement of the left (McCarthy) attacked the unwillingness of the major parties and candidates to take a clear-cut, if highly divisive, position on the Vietnam war. The protest movement of the right (Wallace) attacked the major parties and candidates for not offering a "real choice" on racial issues.

Type D issues are less frequently recognized, if only because they more often produce alienation and abstention than active protest. Type D issues are valence issues with little partisan differentiation -- for instance, perceptions that neither party can solve the problem of inflation, that no candidate is likely to bring about peace, or that both parties are corrupt or incompetent. The most striking recent example in which alienation has risen above the surface is the British general elections of February and October 1974, when large numbers of voters rejected class polarization and the conventional parties and opted instead for an essentially non-ideological, antipartisan alternative, the Liberal Party and the Nationalists.

As Stokes noted in his original essay, the position issue-valence issue distinction should be determined by empirical measurement and not on a priori logical grounds. Similarly, party direction is a directly measurable concept. My principal interest in the conference on "Issue Voting" is to discuss different measurement techniques for these purposes.

It is often the case that an issue affects the electorate in different ways simultaneously. One needs both "position" and "valence" measurements of the issue. For instance, in 1968, the "hawk-dove" debate clearly mobilized voters at the ideological extremes but was of very little use in distinguishing the positions of the major-party candidates, as Page and Brody have demonstrated. At the same time, there was widespread sentiment across the electorate that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a mistake and that the war should be brought to an end as quickly as possible. Key's theory would suggest that many voters switched from Democratic in 1964 to Republican in 1968, not because of a particular policy preference on the war (after all, Nixon kept his "plan" to end the war a secret), but to punish the incumbent Democrats for creating the problem.

I have encountered a similar problem with respect to the inflation issue in 1976. An NBC News poll of voters at polling places on Election Day, 1976, asked respondents to look at a list of 18 issues and check off "the single issue that led you to vote for your Presidential candidate." "Inflation" was the issue most frequently checked (21%). Those who checked inflation voted 58 per cent for Carter and 41 per cent for Ford. Another question in the same survey asked, "In your opinion, which is the more important problem facing the country today -- (A) finding jobs for people who are unemployed, (B) holding down inflation, (C) both equally important, or (D) not sure?" Twenty-four per cent of the respondents chose answer (B), "holding down inflation." But these voters voted 35 per cent for Carter and 63 per cent for Ford! I would conclude that the inflation issue has both valence and positional components. It was Carter who benefited from the widespread "concern over inflation" -- a valence issue -- while Ford did well among a different group of voters,

those who gave inflation priority over unemployment. One finds a link between anti-inflation sentiment and political conservatism only when the question is posed as a position issue.

II. Procedural recommendations

The Center for Political Studies has made significant progress in refining their questionnaires and developing standard formats for certain issue questions. It is now possible to get reasonably good indicators of both position and valence issue effects for most major issues. My feeling is that this effort must be carried further. The "Issue Voting" conference, or a committee thereof, should undertake a systematic review of the issue questions used in CPS (and non-CPS) surveys in order to recommend a set of core items, suitable to most users' needs, which would be considered "standard" in future CPS surveys. I am not suggesting that these core items be considered authoritative or exclusive, only standard. CPS must maintain as much flexibility as possible in adapting their interviews to the current political context. But if the CPS surveys are to be useful as a time series of political indicators, then certain issue questions should be considered just as standard as the questions on party identification and political efficacy.

Let me spell out some comments and suggestions, as a way of indicating the kinds of problems that might be discussed at the "Issue Voting" conference.

(1) Methodological considerations

A. Position issues

The seven-point scales have now become the principal instrument used in the CPS surveys to measure respondents' stands on position issues. Respondents are also asked to indicate party differences on each issue scale by identifying the positions of the major candidates and parties. I believe the scales are a good idea, but there are several problems with their implementation:

1. The use of "interest filters" is questionable ("Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"). Such filters often screen out respondents who are inarticulate, or who feel that they cannot give a "competent" answer to certain questions, even if they have an opinion. Anyone with field experience knows that respondents frequently regard issue questions as tests of knowledge and feel that they are being asked to give the "correct" answer. Moreover, it is difficult to know how to treat variations in "interest" over time; some of these variations are undoubtedly due to interviewer effects. I believe that the "Issue Voting" conference should discuss whether these filters result in a significant and unnecessary loss of information.

2. Several of the by-now-standard issue scales pose alternatives which are, in my opinion, biased and misrepresentative -- "neighborhood schools" as the alternative to busing, "let each person get ahead on his own" as the alternative to Federal social welfare spending, "minority groups should help themselves" as the alternative to government aid, "leave fair employment laws to states and local communities" as the alternative to Federal laws. These positions express creedal values such as individual initiative and local self-determination. They are therefore unusually attractive to respondents. Support for the alternative positions is systematically understated or distorted. Thus, we do not find out how many respondents support government social welfare spending; we find out how many respondents prefer such programs to individual initiative.

3. The inflation scale used in 1972 was not a position issue at all and did not belong in this set of questions.

4. The marginal distributions on several of the seven-point scales indicate that respondents really perceive only the two stated positions, or possibly the two stated positions plus the middle position. A seven-point scale is apparently too elaborate a measurement in these cases.

The conference should consider making improvements in the scale questions. But it should also consider a more flexible approach to the measurement of issue positions. I think there is a great deal of merit to the traditional Guttman-scaling approach in

which respondents are asked to agree or disagree with one issue position at a time. With scale items rather than predetermined scales, trend analysis would still be possible, but it would also be possible to treat the scalability of the items as an over-time variable.

I am not committed to this or any other specific format. But I do think that the "Issue Voting" conference should discuss the problem of measuring "positionality" before the format of CPS issue questions is set by default.

B. Valence issues

Variables 3705-3735 in the 1976 CPS survey represent a substantial improvement in the measurement of valence issues. Respondents in 1976 were given a pack of cards, each designating a broad "problem area." Respondents were first asked to remove those cards designating issues they considered "not at all important." They then indicated whether "the government in Washington" had "no responsibility, some responsibility, or a great deal of responsibility" for solving each important problem. Finally, respondents selected and ordered the four issues they considered most important.

As in the case of the seven-point scales, I think this approach is a good idea but can be substantially improved. Why not ask respondents to rate the importance of each issue, one at a time, on a scale from, say, one to ten? It would not take any more time and would be a good deal more informative than the approach used in the 1976 survey. Moreover, the 1976 format did not ask respondents to evaluate the performance of the incumbent administration in each issue area, or to indicate whether one party would handle the issue better than the other. This information is critical for assessing the impact of "performance judgments" on the outcome of the election. I would like to see the Center for Political Studies develop a standard, biannual rating scheme for assessing government performance and perceived party differences in a series of issue areas.

(2) Substantive considerations

The "Issue Voting" conference ought to come to some agreement on a list of core issue areas for which standard indicators

should be developed. As a first approximation, I would suggest three domestic issue areas and three areas of foreign policy which should be regularly monitored.

1. Domestic issues
 - a. Economic and social welfare policy
 - b. Race and civil rights
 - c. Social and cultural issues (civil liberties, women's rights, treatment of accused criminals, civil disobedience, etc.)
2. Foreign policy
 - a. Communism and relations with Communist countries
 - b. Military policy (military aid and intervention, defense spending, etc.)
 - c. Isolationism and internationalism

These issue areas are certainly not salient in every election, but they have shown a persistence over time that justifies treating them as "fundamental" political issues. Indeed, the 1952-1976 SRC/CPS surveys have covered these six issue areas with varying degrees of comprehensiveness and consistency. I have made an inventory of the questions asked on each of these topics. CPS already treats a number of questions in these issue areas as fairly "standard." Why not make a systematic effort to standardize the substance and format of these questions, rather than allow the situation to remain a halfway effort? This effort at standardization should involve systematic research into the effects of alternative question-wordings and the precise meaning of different formulations before any decision is reached.