

MEMORANDUM ON SOME POTENTIAL ISSUES FOR FUTURE CPS ELECTION STUDIES

To begin with, I'm not at all sure which of the proposed conferences is more appropriate for this collection of thoughts on the subject of future CPS surveys. The subject matter of this memo overlaps with both issue voting and party identification. Hedging this way allows me a chance to send a copy to each of the convenors of the Stanford and Florida State conferences.

There are three, somewhat interrelated questions I would like to see explored in future CPS election studies. The intellectual origins of all three are shrouded in the fogs of how one reads various authors, so I'll not go into the derivation of them in depth. Besides, citing chapter and verse is a bit too formal and time-consuming for the purposes of this memo. Briefly, the three are these:

1. To what extent is party identification a less-than-overarching concept for American voters?
2. Are voters assessments of the choices presented, especially in incumbent/challenger contests, as much a function of the electoral context as of parties, personalities, and issues?
3. Can we construct more manageable "filtering" questions for the spatial placement of candidates and voters on issues?

The next three sections of the memo deals with and expands each of these subjects in turn.

I. Party identification in a multi-tiered electoral system.

Party ID has become, over the past twenty years, such an overarching term that a better specification of its components might yield a much more precise understanding of its implications. As the CPS lead-in question is still phrased ("Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as..."), we completely disregard several logical and theoretically meaningful possibilities. Within a multi-tiered (federal) electoral system, these possibilities include:

(i) An identification with one party at all levels of the American federal system. This context is implicitly assumed by the wording of previous election studies.

(ii) An identification with one party at some levels (at least one) of that system, and with no party at other levels of government.

(iii) An identification with different parties at different levels of government.

(iv) A varying sense of party identification, dependent upon the electoral context of the office in question.

As the voter understands the concept, a self-ascribed identification with one party or another (or both, depending) may not easily fit into the implicit assumption of (i) above. We have evidence from other federal systems (Canada, for instance) that a sizeable proportion of the population identifies with a party at only one level of government or with different parties at different levels. Since our questioning format does not admit of this possibility in the U.S. of A., we are left with substantial binds and some fancy intellectual footwork trying to explain growing trends toward ticket-splitting behavior and varying (over time) party success within a state or district.

As an example, we can focus in a bit on this question by looking at a growing phenomenon in American politics, the off-year success of the presidential "out" party in gubernatorial elections. I've done some research on the question (not as yet published) of how we might explain these successes in terms of party, incumbency, and "federal status" (where federal status is defined as the context of the gubernatorial election in terms of who controls the presidency). When V. O. Key was examining the trends in the states with respect to the party of the president most gubernatorial elections were held in presidential years. As recently as 1952 there were 30 gubernatorial elections, in 1976 only 14. At the time of Key's writing on the subject, the proportion of governors' offices held by a party "tracked" with the presidential vote. No longer. An inverse relationship is now the case, with increasing success for the "out" party over a presidential tenure.

Since Key's day reforms in the states have accomplished three things: fewer 2-year terms, more elections in presidential off-years, and an increased ability for incumbents to succeed themselves. These reforms have produced what I call "federal effects," with even incumbency wiped out as an explanatory variable during the second term of a party's presidential tenure. The prediction that the "out" party will retain a governorship is supported 83% of the time (all states, all gubernatorial elections in presidential off-years, 1949-1975), while the "ins" hold onto governor's offices only 51% of the time. In cases where an incumbent is running for election, the office is retained 67% of the time compared to a retention rate of 64% for both parties when no incumbent is running. Breaking these findings down a little finer and eliminating the South from the analysis, we find:

FREQUENCY OF RETAINING THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE: Nonsouthern states only, 1949-75.

Type of election	Incumbent Running	Incumbent is a member of the	
		PRESIDENT'S PARTY	OPPOSITION PARTY
	Incumbent Running	.55 (n=29)	.80 (n=25)
	No incumbent Running	.30 (n=37)	.80 (n=20)

Something's going on here that I cannot explore (except conjecturally) without survey data. Even with survey data I cannot support or reject notions about the importance of the electoral context (i.e., the party in power nationally as an important part of voters' activities) using a survey format worded "generally speaking." My hypotheses must remain hunches or conjectures in the absence of a more sharply differentiated "party identification."

Why might the voters choose (or a whole lot of them in a whole lot of states, at any rate) to divide party control in our federal system? Is condition (iv), above, a meaningful approach to the question? I may be suggesting another panel study to attempt to answer these questions.

II. Incumbency and the risk environment.

This question overlaps with the panel on Congressional elections and deals with the general notion of "incumbent safety." I am suggesting that the survey instrument could be expanded to include responses on whether the voters view the respective candidates in electoral contexts (not necessarily including an incumbent) as more or less risky alternatives. If the candidates are so perceived (e.g., an incumbent such as LBJ in '64 or Milhous in '72), and the voters are varyingly risk acceptant/averse (dependent, perhaps, on economic circumstances), we might expect to find the electoral context a major indicator of voting choice.

This question is a side-issue of the question set out in condition (iv), but is potentially fruitful for our understanding of political behavior. Ticket-splitting and the gubernatorial results sketched out above are undeniably growing trends, some part of which can be accounted for by voters' perceptions of risk. To cite the oft-used example of insurance buying as risk averse behavior, we might view a voter's willingness to divide party control over the several tiers of government as a kind of "electoral insurance." This is especially important in an era where both parties are viewed with increasing skepticism. If you don't trust either party wholeheartedly and elections are viewed contingently (not a whole lot of evidence either way on that question), how might a risk-averse voter behave? Which voters are more likely to be risk-acceptant, in these terms?

In many respects, what I am raising is a set of questions about the possibility of elections being interdependent (rather than independent) events. Contextual matters have been given little theoretical play, yet these may be significant to many voters in coming up with a choice. I'm not sure how to proceed in sorting out the kinds of contextual differences the voters might perceive, except I suspect that a series of more-or-less questions will have to

be posed to survey respondents. Something on the order of: "How well can you make out the position of (candidate x) on (issue important to the voter)?" How about (candidate y)? Analytically, we then have:

Candidate (x,y) is more firmly perceived (less risky choice) and is therefore favored (risk averse behavior) or opposed (risk acceptant behavior).

The implications of this line of reasoning allows us to test a whole line of theoretical reasoning about how choices are made.

III. Issue salience and the spatial placement of candidates/voters.

Not unlike a whole series of other investigators of the peculiarities of the American voter, I am less than satisfied with the interval assumptions made when developing a spatial context within which to place voters and their perceptions of candidates. I operate from the assumption (paraphrasing many public opinion researchers) that "most of the people, most of the time, on most issues have no opinion. But if you ask them they'll give you one anyway." Now that presents a bind or two for spatial models of voting choice. It says that even if we treat most voters' positions on the issues (and their perceptions of the candidates' positions on those issues) as a vector, most of the elements within the vector will be zero.

Let's take the example of the seven-point issue scale used by the CPS in their election studies. This has been used as an interval-level measure in a closed-ended format by many, none of whose results I trust.

A few years ago I wanted to develop a predictive model of voting choice using the seven-point scales from the 1972 election. The dependent variable was three valued (for candidate 1, abstain, for candidate 2). Starting from the assumption set out above, I eliminated the "4" position and looked at the two sides of the selected issues separately. Self placement on either side, along with the placement of the two candidates on opposing sides increased the likelihood that a vote would be cast for the candidate on the same side of the

issue. This model worked pretty well.

Next I eliminated the "3,4,5" positions (assuming them to be where a voter who truly has no opinion but is "forced" into one will end up) and looked at the self- and candidate-placements, yielding fewer voting indicators for each voter (save those who seem to respond in polar categories throughout). This model increased my predictive accuracy by about 10%!

What I am suggesting here is that a filtering device or two be developed to increase the analytical reliability of using closed-ended questions. And this may lead to less elegant, yet more reliable, spatial placements of voters in issue spaces. Without making assumptions about the integer properties of survey responses (which I am loath to do, though I can see the necessity of it from time to time), can we test assumptions that voters vote "for" and/or "against" candidates by treating issue responses as a vector with the possibility of many "zero" elements? I suspect that we can do a lot better than we have so far. Beyond that I'm not willing to speculate a whole lot. But then, that's what these conferences are supposed to be about: raising questions on how to proceed. If that's the case, I have a few.



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