

Gerald C. Wright, Jr.
Florida Atlantic University

The study of issue voting has focused primarily on characteristics of voters, how they process information about candidates and parties, and the technology of measurement in studying electoral choice. The purpose of my comments is to argue for systematic examination of the impact of nature of the electoral choices presented upon how the electorate makes decisions; to examine voters and ignore the character of the alternatives between which they must decide is to omit a crucial element of the electoral process.

The study of issue voting has focused much more on aspects of voters than on the nature of the choices they must make. This lack of attention to the nature of electoral contests seems to be primarily due to our collective preoccupation with the role of issues in presidential elections. One consequence of this is that in any given election year there is seemingly no variance in the choices offered to voters in the presidential elections. The issues and personalities of say the Carter-Ford contest are essentially constant for all voters. Hence, explanations for electoral behavior must rest with differences among voters rather than variations in the electoral alternatives they are presented. Clearly, however, voters' decisions are a function of both the voters' characteristics and the nature of electoral choice and how it is presented. And only by systematically incorporating differences in the nature of elections into our analyses can we fully determine relative influences of the world of politics versus the personal and social world of the voter on the role of issues in how voters make decisions.

This thinking suggests greater attention should be given to the contextual character of elections. A number of strategies can be used to

determine how differences in electoral alternatives influence issue voting. One approach is to maintain our focus on presidential contests and to assess longitudinal changes in voter behavior in different elections. The emphasis to date, however, has been to describe changes in voters rather than to determine how voters respond to changes in the choices they are offered. The development of objective measures of, say, presidential candidates' issue positions overtime would permit analysis of pooled CPS presidential surveys with election characteristics as one of the variables or covariates in our studies.

My own interest in the interaction between the nature of electoral contests and processes of voter decision making has taken a second approach of focusing on subpresidential voting where there is considerable cross-sectional variance in both voter and election characteristics. Comparing across contests among a common set of voters permits a systematic approach to determining the responsiveness of the electorate to varying types of electoral choice situations. This gives one leverage on the overall question of how the political world influences voters; how the structure of an office impinges on both the nature of media coverage and interest group attention to a contest, and hence on the costs of various types of information (e.g., issues, candidates' records and personalities) under varying sets of conditions.

Two types of issue voting analyses seem particularly promising here. The first is inter-office comparisons, say comparing the relative effects of party, and issues in presidential versus gubernatorial and senatorial elections. A second related type of analysis is to compare voting across elections for the same office. One might examine the role of issues across gubernatorial elections classified, for example, according to whether an incumbent is running for re-election or whether or not taxes were raised by the incumbent administration.

Two types of information are required for analysis of the impact of election characteristics of voter decisions. First, we need comparable items asked about incumbents and challengers running for different offices. These questions must permit considerable flexibility in responses in order to faithfully record the variety of voter reactions and information that will be encountered in different contests. Given the wide range of issues in subpresidential contests I think one of the most profitable avenues may be to use the candidate master code items extended to offices below the presidency as has been done in the 1968 Comparative State Elections Project (governor and U.S. senator) and the 1974 CPS Election Study (U.S. senator).

The second type of information necessary is largely contextual. We must be able to place voters in the issue/choice contexts in which they decide. Several types of information are of obvious value: (1) Information on the policy positions of candidates. The magnitude of issue differences between candidates is clearly important in assessing the role of issues in the voter's choice. (2) Information available to voters through the media. Some monitoring of the levels and nature of information coming through the media about candidates for different offices would be most useful. (3) Reports about the conduct of campaigns in different contests. It may well be that voters are more responsive to how candidates actually are presented than to their stated, but not necessarily emphasized, policy positions.

A second and related area that has not received sufficient attention is the antecedents of voters' perceptions of candidates. My work with the Comparative State Elections Project data suggests that there is virtually as much variance in perceptions of candidate positions as there is in the voters' own policy preferences. Moreover, I have found in the case of the

1968 presidential election that perceptions of candidates vary rather systematically with some demographic contextual factors. This suggests that groups are important, not only in influencing individuals' own attitudes, but also how citizens see the candidates on a series of valence and positions issues. Thus, there may well be some intellectual payoff in continuing to obtain individual perceptions of candidates and additionally to gathering information on how people believe selected others view the candidates. A priority for additional contextual information here would be to obtain independent measures of how a common contest, the presidency, is differentially defined by media and other elites in different contexts.

Viewing voters as imbedded in very different socio-political contexts suggests that voters participating in the same presidential contest, but residing in different areas, may very well be making choices that are defined quite differently. This argues for resurrecting earlier notions of the "climate of opinion," but now calling for the identification of local variances in definitions of political reality. If we allow the possibility that Jimmy Carter--the national media notwithstanding--may be seen and defined differently in Orange County, California and Albany, Georgia, then it would argue that variances in perceptions of candidates are not just random error or rationalizations but, may be reasonable responses to voter's (local) "reality." As a matter of research, this line of investigation would suggest mini-surveys of selected media and political elites, at least in a sample of the CPS psu's, as well as a monitoring of the presentation of candidates in the local media.

This memorandum is a plea for systematically incorporating the structure of political choice into our analyses of voting. It is in looking at how voters respond to variations in the choices offered by the socio-political system that we are most likely to make progress toward a general understanding

of not just voting, but the electoral process. A major step in this direction, I feel, is in gathering data on the variables that define the nature of electoral alternatives and how these alternatives become differentially defined across the electorate.