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August 23, 1977

Dear Colleague:

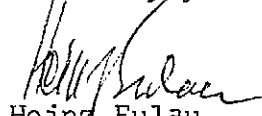
Some weeks ago I wrote you about the grant made by the National Science Foundation to the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, for the extension and development of its election studies during the next five years. At that time, in the name of the Board of Overseers for the National Election Studies, I invited scholars interested and active in election research to let us have their ideas on Congressional elections research in anticipation of a conference to be held in October.

The purpose of this letter is to invite interested persons to consider the enclosed memorandum prepared by Professor Kristi Andersen and myself in preparation of a similar conference on the issues surrounding the concept of party identification, to be held at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, on February 23-4, 1978. The intention of this memorandum is to stimulate ideas and suggestions for discussion at the conference. We would be pleased to receive relevant memoranda, from 3 to 10 pages in length, not later than December 5.

From among those responding by way of memoranda of their own we hope to invite some 20 to the conference. Needless to say, the Board will cover travel, lodging, meal and out-of-pocket expenses of the participants. All memoranda should be typed to permit easy reproduction. They should be sent to Board of Overseers, National Election Studies, P.O. Box Z, Stanford, California 94305. Persons to be invited to the conference will be so informed in late December.

Speaking for the Board,

Sincerely yours,


Heinz Eulau

HE:wf

MEMORANDUM FOR

A CONFERENCE ON PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Of the concepts and variables introduced into the study of voting behavior by the electoral studies of the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan (formerly, the Survey Research Center), none has been more central than party identification. Indeed, as the authors of a recent volume on the subject note, "in the course of a mere two decades, party identification has become as pervasive a concept as power, authority, legitimacy, stability or any other element in the professional political scientist's vocabulary."

We have measured party identification (by a single question in an interview schedule), but we do not quite know just what it is that we have measured. As a result, analysts have been free to place varying interpretations on the concept, or, rather, impose quite arbitrary meanings derived from fanciful theories (ranging from the psychoanalytic to the economic). These interpretations, in turn, are then being used to appraise, often in speculative manner, changes that have occurred over the years in party identification as measured by the rather simple question posed to respondents in surveys. In short, there has been a theoretical overdetermination of the concept of party identification not warranted by presently available evidence.

Of the four sessions to be devoted to party identification at the conference to be held at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida, on February 23-4, 1978, one session should be devoted to the problem of conceptualization. This, it seems

to us, is a necessary first step in a reexamination of relevant research and of the theoretical and technical questions that have been raised in recent years. For, does it make sense, for instance, to ask whether an individual's party identification is a direct, unmediated determinant of his or her electoral choices if we have only an operational but not a theoretically unambiguous definition of what it is that we are talking about and presumably measuring? Or does it make sense to argue over whether party identification is antecedent or consequent to cognitive and evaluative patterns of thought that, in turn, condition individual political behavior, if the substantive phenomenon presumably out there in the real world is treated as if it were an epiphenomenon?

A second session at the conference might be devoted fruitfully to the findings concerning party identification in comparative transnational research which have been the source of much discomfort to political analysts. Indeed, one of the most potentially damaging criticisms of the concept of party identification has to do with its most common use: as the chief among several possible determinants of citizen's votes. European scholars have raised the question rather bluntly, sometimes denying, in effect, that party identification exists as a phenomenon independent of current vote choice -- at least in some European contexts. Such findings suggest several possible lines of investigation. One of these is simply the applicability of the concept of party identification cross-nationally. Only a few years ago, it could be stated that "something appro-

priately labelled partisan identification is evident everywhere, and it has much the same properties as assigned to it in the U.S. political system." This assertion has been increasingly called into question; it is evident, then, that one of the pressing tasks before us is a systematic consideration of cross-national variations in the validity of the concept, in order both to ascertain its general theoretical usefulness and to illuminate the study of American political behavior by comparison.

A third session of the conference should be devoted to the question of how changes in research design might help to untangle the causal and temporal relationships among partisan preference, attitudes on issues, group identifications and vote choice. By changing the sample design of the election studies to include a lower age limit of 14 rather than 18, the full four-year cohort of those who would be eligible to vote in the next presidential election would be available for study prior to the time they assume the role of potential voter. Particularly where party identification is hypothesized to be the antecedent for candidate and issue preferences, this change in design could help disentangle some of the perplexing problems of causal inference concerning the development of these attitudes.

The possibility of a pre-election, pre-convention study in 1980, especially a multi-wave panel study during the primary season, offers another means of placing party identification in its proper position in the funnel of causality. Until now, analysts of CPS data have been unable to represent or decompose the dynamics of attitude formation during a campaign -- including

the mobilization of partisan identification, the perception of candidate positions, the activation of the voters' issue positions, and the joint effects of these attitudes on candidate preference. A multi-wave panel study during the pre-convention period has been proposed as one means of specifying more precisely the dynamics of attitude formation including, of course, the role of party preference, perceptions of the parties' positions, and affect toward the parties.

A final session of the conference would be devoted to some of the more immediately technical issues of concern in regard to voting behavior. There is the issue of the meaning of "identification" with a party for the individual and the function that identification serves for that individual. Because the measure of party identification is so simple and has "worked" so well in many instances, some of very simple technical questions have not been asked. For instance, if identification means that the individual achieves a sense of self and a social location by feeling close to one group and distancing himself/herself from another, to what extent does this description apply to most people's categorization of themselves as Democrats or Republicans? Is the sense of identification substantively different for different people? What measurements might permit a disaggregation of the current unidimensional concept of party identification so that these questions might be answered?

A key assumption underlying the use of partisan identification has been that one's party acts as a perceptual screen, filtering and modifying the political information one receives

from the environment; but this assumption has not been carefully examined either. Might multiple measures of party preference enable us to describe this information processing and simplifying process more precisely?

The current "dealignment" of the electorate has raised many questions about the theoretical status of the "Independent" category. Considered almost a residual category in previous years, the growth in numbers and, some would argue, sophistication of independents may well produce a greater concern for the meaning and implications of "independent" as a self-classification. What are the behavioral correlates of independence? Is it purely a negative identity, a rejection of Democrats and Republicans, or does it entail -- for some people, at least -- the kind of positive "identity" that is assumed? Is there a functional equivalent of the party-as-perceptual-screen for independents? Connected with these questions are others such as those recently raised by Brody (APSA paper, 1977) concerning the direction and strength of party identification. In particular, if strength of identification is more labile than direction, does this reflect response or measurement error, systematic increases in strength over a partisan's life span, systematic decreases due to extended periods of political turmoil, or variable responses to party performance, candidate selection or other short-term forces?

The purpose of this memorandum has not been to review in any exhaustive way current problems in the conceptualization and measurement of party identification but rather to stimulate

our colleagues to make, in response, an input to the agenda and content of the forthcoming conference. Few would deny the inherent value of the concept and of the analyses which it has produced for understanding both individual political behavior and the aggregate behavior of the political system. Nonetheless, this very simple concept has been burdened with more and more assumptions and asked to explain more and more political phenomena since Key advanced the notion of the "standing decision." The result is that there is currently a certain unease as to whether, in fact, "its conceptual and measurement simplicity mask underlying complexities which it does not solve but merely glosses over."

The February conference on Party Identification should give the conferees and the scholarly community as a whole the opportunity to pursue both short-term and long-term goals with regard to the conceptualization and measurement of partisan predispositions. In the short run, and directed particularly toward the 1980 election study, there is the opportunity to improve and refine the measurement of party identification so that, for example, we have a better idea of the effect of different forms of question wording or different alternatives on partisan responses. Over the long term, this conference and others to follow should be seen as a step toward improving our understanding of the role of party in the mind of the citizen and, perhaps, toward rethinking the kinds of research agendas which will be needed to produce such an understanding. It is hoped that the present rather sketchy summary of some pertinent questions about

the party identification measure will stimulate a number of our colleagues to respond with memoranda to the NES/CPS Board of Overseers.

Conference Participation. The conference will be held at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, on February 23-24, 1978. About twenty scholars will be invited. An important factor in extending invitations will be the submission of relevant memoranda which respond to this memorandum and which outline, concisely but as concretely as possible, directions for the conference and future research on party identification. These memoranda may be as short as three or as long as ten pages. They should be sent to the Board of Overseers, National Election Studies, P.O. Box Z, Stanford, California 94305, by December 5, 1977. Conference invitees will be notified later in that month. The Board will cover the travel, lodging, food and out-of-pocket expenses of the participants.

In addition to memoranda of interest in the conference, we will of course be grateful for any suggestions concerning the study of electoral behavior and related topics, by conference participants and others, before or after the conference. General comments or inquiries concerning the National Election Studies, the Board of Overseers and its program may be directed to the Board at the Stanford address, or to any of its individual members. Specific questions and suggestions concerning the party identification conference should be addressed directly to one or both of the conference organizers, Professor Kristi Andersen, Department of Political Science, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210, or to Professor Heinz Eulau, P.O. Box Z, Stanford, California 94305.