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TO: Board of Overseers
National Election Studies

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FROM: Steven Rood
Boston University

The purpose of this memorandum is very simple--to examine the concept of party identification in the light of an interpretative view of the social sciences. I shall begin by discussing the current SRC measurement procedures and some empirical findings in interpretative terms. Then I shall present some suggestions on questionnaire construction and discuss these with a view towards making party identification (and thus electoral behavior in general) more amenable to interpretative investigation. Finally, a brief sketch of the most salient points of the interpretative view is presented in order to emphasize the necessity for such changes in procedure.

(i)

I shall begin with the observation that the SRC method of measuring party identification attempts to elicit the respondent's self-interpretation:

- Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?
- (If Republican or Democrat)Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?
- (If Independent or Other)Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?

Clearly, the respondents are being asked to characterize themselves, that is, to offer a self-interpretation, in the terms of American party politics. However, since the question is conceived by the analyst instead of by the actor, some points must be raised. In the first place, the question offers categories into which the respondents can place themselves. The importance of this is widely recognized, and is illustrated by West German data which has 49% of the electorate identifying with a party when names of parties were provided as cues, and only 27% doing so in response to a question which did not mention party names.(Kasse, 1976, p. 89) The problem of categories can be resolved into two sub-questions:

(1) are the correct categories being included; and (2) does the inclusion of explicit categories prompt people to give an answer that they might not have given spontaneously?

Leaving sub-question (1) aside for the moment, it is clear from the data that the answer to (2) is "yes," but the significance of this answer is not immediately apparent. Notice that this question can be subsumed under the more general one, whether the asking of the party identification question itself (in whatever form) leads people to give answers that would not occur to them spontaneously. The interpretative view of the social sciences asserts that we need to ascertain the beliefs and interpretations of the actor as a starting point in our analysis. This leads to a second, more general problem concerning the construction of the question: can we, by means of this and other questions, find out what the respondents mean by attaching a party label to themselves? As MacIntyre notes (1971, p. 12), we don't "avoid this difficulty merely by finding some description of the behaviour in question which both the agents themselves and the political scientist would accept." Even if both the agent and the analyst are satisfied with the label "Strong Democrat" when the agent answers the questions appropriately, very different meanings could be attached to "identifying strongly with the Democratic party." These questions and observations bring into focus the necessity to consider the meaning of party identification.

To begin with, much of the debate about the cross-national applicability of party identification can be cast in terms of the meaning of "party identification." For instance, does "Strong Labourite" mean "very inclined to vote Labour in the upcoming general election?" Or, does "adherent of the KVP" (Netherlands) mean only "I am a Catholic who regularly attends mass?"* Analyses which attempt to show that party identification is not independent of other variables (e.g., vote intention or primary groups) can be seen as claiming that the meaning of the answers to the party identification questions can be reduced to the meanings of these other

* See the first six chapters of Budge et al. (1976).

variables. If this is the case, then the lack of independent status of party identification would tend to show that the notion of "identification with a party" has not added meaning to the self-interpretation the agent constructs on the basis of these other variables.

In all of this debate, however, it is agreed that the party identification variable is a useful one in the American context. For instance, causal modeling shows that party identification has an impact independent of socio-economic characteristics or opinion on issues, but that it is not so closely related to the vote that it is merely a surrogate for vote intention. (Schulman & Pomper, 1975) The question then remains, what is the connection between party identification and voting? It seems that we must have a way to make intelligible the connection between a party identification response like "strong Democrat" and voting behavior. The interpretative view claims that in order to do this we need to know the meaning of the situation for the agent. It is important to realize that statistical analysis alone cannot provide an adequate answer (the problem of interpretation remains to be solved). Statistics can indicate that there is no independent phenomenon to interpret, but once a phenomenon has been identified, it is a separate matter to seek a coherence between the meaning of, for instance, party identification for the agent and the voting behavior to be explained.

The task of establishing the meanings for the agent should be the first step in interpretation, for otherwise it would be impossible to identify the relevant variables. However, I would argue that in the case of party identification (and, incidentally, many other variables in social science) this first step is taken in a commonsensical manner by the social scientist. There are good, intuitive, reasons for supposing that in the United States people do indeed think of themselves as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. In the first place, there is the system of registration which requires those who are registered to so designate themselves.* In the second place, there is the continuing presence of heterogeneous political

*Notice that this can be taken as at least a partial answer to sub-question (1) that was left aside for a moment (supra, page 2).

parties, which makes it plausible that (a) people come to associate themselves with one of the parties (or to have their non-association be conceptualized as "independence") and (b) they have that association independent of their primary group associations. Finally, the sheer multiplicity of levels of voting and electoral offices makes it more likely that Americans have an identification with party which is independent of voting intention. However, all of this is just my commonsensical musing as a member of the American culture. It is clear that we must go beyond the commonsensical in order to do social analysis. For instance, for all I know it is just as plausible to some social scientist in another culture to use "party identification," only to find that the concept seems to have little independent meaning for the agent. This is only the most obvious pitfall: notice also that all I have been doing is establishing the plausibility of an independent meaning for party identification in the U.S. without explicating that meaning.

There are some references in the literature to the "meaning" of party identification. For example, one of the obvious places to start from is *the* South and its Democratic tradition. Perhaps being a "Strong Democrat" means something different to a Southerner than it does to a Northerner. Converse (1966, p. 217) noted the possibility that such a Southerner might be referring to the local Democratic party, while being willing to vote Republican at the Presidential level. However, Converse found that there was little discrimination between levels, and that, of those who did have different identifications at different levels, all had given the national level identification as a response to the original questions. In the same vein, Matthews and Prothro (1966, pp. 157-159) note that the Southerners are referring to the national parties, and their like/dislike comments are such that when compared to Northerners' like/dislike comments it appears that both sets of citizens are perceiving the parties in the same fashion (e.g., Southerners are more likely to mention Civil Rights policy as something they don't like about the Democratic party). These findings tend to show that there is no difference in the object referred

to when people speak of the Democratic party, but they neither give us the meaning the Democratic party has for the agent, or what it means to the agent to be a "Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what."

Consider first what it means to accept one of these labels at all. The agent is engaged in a process of self-interpretation, based on the conventions of society. Therefore, while agents may have the same object in mind when they speak of "the Democratic party"* they can still differ widely on the meaning of the objects for themselves, and the uses to which they put their self-labeling. As an example, Miller (1976, p. 28) notes that in 1972 "the new voters in that election appear to have selected their party loyalties to match their commitments in questions of public policy." It should be immediately obvious that "Strong Democrat" in this case means something different from what it means in the case of somebody who accepts that label because family and friends do. In the former case, the agent has opinions on issues and chooses between the parties (much like the voter in rational choice models) and it would seem to be stretching the meanings of terms to call this loyalty at all. It would be interesting to know if these new voters do conceive of their actions in rational choice terms, since all we have done so far is to provide our own interpretations to account for the findings.

Consider next some other hints that can be gathered about the meaning of party identification, this time again referring to North/South differences. A crosstabulation of party identification by reasons cited for liking the Democratic party. ("Is there anything in particular you like about the Democratic party?") was performed, using the 1972 election data.** For all the categories of Democratic Identifiers (Strong, Weak, and Independent) persons in the North were more likely to cite reasons having to do with aiding groups than were Southerners (37.0% of all responses versus 26.5%). This indicates that, although both sets of respondents may be

*I don't regard this question as settled. See, for example, the different views of "party" analyzed by Ranney in "The Concept of Party." (1968)

**The data utilized in this paper were made available by the ICPSR. The data were originally collected by the Center for Political Studies. Neither the original source nor the Consortium bear responsibility for the interpretations offered here.

referring to the same object, the meaning of the Democratic party (and, hence, the meaning of identification with the party) has more to do with the specific groups involved for the Northern set than the Southern set. Here is a finding that indicates a difference in meaning, but, again, the content of that difference remains a subject for speculation.

Another question that emerges has to do with the relationships between the categories that the SRC questions create: what differences in meaning and usage exist. Conventionally, it has been assumed that the categories form an ordinal scale measuring degrees of, say, Republicanism, ranging from Strong Republican through Independent-Independent to Strong Democrat. This would mean that "Independent, leaning Republican" means "less Republican" than "Weak Republican." However, Petrocik (1974, pp. 32-36) points out intransitivities in the party identification index. On many measures of political involvement (e.g., general interest in politics, use of mass media to follow the campaign) "leaners" come out higher than both Independent-Independents and weak identifiers (hence the intransitivity). This is traced to the higher levels of education and income that leaners possess in relation to the categories on either side of them. An interpretation of this might be that such people in the U.S. are more thoroughly imbued with the cultural norm that people should not be "blind adherents" of parties, but, when probed, they admit to feeling closer to one party than another. In this light, Petrocik's suggestion that "one might want to consider alternative ways to measure partisanship--ways which will not have the intransitivity documented here" (p. 41) seems misguided. An important part of these persons' self-interpretation is as independent thinkers, and their preference (by and large) for one party is secondary. For instance, the same crosstabulation procedure used above reveals that (even when controlled for level of education) Independent Democrats (Democratic leaners) are more likely to cite policy considerations as reasons for liking the Democratic party than are Weak Democrats (overall, 16.3% of responses versus 11.0%). It appears likely that such agents are using specific

policies as justifications for leaning towards the Democrats while maintaining their self-image as Independents. Any attempt to "cure" the intransitivities by obscuring these differences in self-interpretation is plainly ill advised, as it would systematically prevent us from making intelligible the connection between the agent's self-interpretation and his/her actions.

These quick glances at empirical results should demonstrate the value of looking at party identification in an interpretative manner, and indicate some of the current obstacles to such an approach. I now turn to the implications this discussion holds for measurement of party identification.

(ii)

This section must begin by pointing out an overall problem in the above analyses: all the interpretations were made by the analyst and were based on a common-sense understanding of what being an American means in the political sense. All views of social science agree on the need to go beyond the commonsensical; the standard scientific view fears being trapped at the level of the agent's intuition, and so goes on to statistical methods to avoid such a trap. However, this procedure then rests on the analyst's common sense, his/her intuition as to what the ways are to formulate variables in a political culture, and what the correlations found in the data might mean. In order to go beyond this common sense, we must systematically elicit actors' interpretations of their situation and actions. As it stands, all we find in the data are hints as to what "party identification" might mean, and this is a crucial defect inasmuch as party identification has been taken (and rightly so) as a crucial variable. Until we can more directly determine the meaning of this variable (and of others as well) social scientists will be unable to explain their findings with any confidence.

The foregoing considerations lead to the suggestion of adding open-ended questions immediately after the current party identification questions. One possible set could run as follows:

(If Strong Democrat)

--Do you have any friends that you would call Democrats, but not strong Democrats?

--(If yes)What do you think are the differences between you and them?

--(If no)What, in general, do you think are the differences between a strong Democrat and a not very strong Democrat?

--Do you have any friends that you would call Independents?

--(If yes)What do you think are the differences between you as a Democrat and them as Independents?

--(If no)What, in general, do you think are the differences between a Democrat and an Independent?

--Do you have any friends that you would call Republicans?

--(If yes)What do you think are the differences between you as a Democrat and them as Republicans?

--(If no)What, in general, do you think are the differences between a Democrat and a Republican?

There would be an analogous set of questions for each of the possible categories of the SRC questions, and the answers could be coded in a manner similar to the current like/dislike questions. Notice that this would get at a number of dimensions of the meaning of party identification. First we would have the respondent's characterization of the strength component, and then the meaning of Democratic identification as opposed to Independent or Republican. This would also generate a set of responses for those who answer in terms of friends and another for those in general terms. The contrast between the two sets would probably prove interesting.

Of course, I realize that the addition of such a set of open-ended questions, with their coding requirements, would prove to be prohibitively expensive. Also, the answering of three straight questions could become irksome; in this case it would seem that the third question is the most dispensable. However, this set of questions should give an idea of the sort of information which needs to be gathered. A more feasible addition to the questionnaire would be a single open-ended question immediately after the current SRC questions:

--When you call yourself a (e.g., Strong Democrat), what do you mean by that? (Then probe with "Why is that?")

The answers to this question would not cover as many dimensions as the responses to the full set offered above would, but they would at least provide us with the first direct link to what the respondents themselves mean by these categories. Until we

take such a step, we will be limited to the social scientist's imputation of meaning to these categories.

(iii)

A counter-claim, coming from the standard scientific view of social science, might be made that we do not need to elicit the agent's self-interpretation. It could be asserted that we do indeed know the meaning of party identification to the extent that it can be correlated with certain forms of behavior.* Notice that this was the approach taken by Converse (1966, pp. 217-218) when he was investigating the meaning of "being a Democrat" for Northerners and Southerners. He found that there was little difference between the two sets on whether they had always voted for the same party's candidate for President. There are two objections to this reply. First, the behavior correlated with being a "Strong Democrat" can change over time. This is demonstrated by Mie et al. (1976, pp. 62-70) when they show that for older cohorts, split ticket voting and negative evaluations of the respondent's own party have increased, while levels of party identification have remained fairly stable. Since party identification was originally conceived to be a self-identification, the meaning to the agent is of prime interest. This standard view of meaning would hold that the changes in behavior indicate changes in meaning, but nothing in electoral research leads us to expect changes over time in what an individual means by "Strong Democrat." In order to understand why somebody who considers themselves, say, a Strong Democrat, can behave in these different fashions at different times we need their self-interpretation to investigate how the connection between action and meaning can be made intelligible.

However, there is a second, more general problem with the counter-claim noted above. This involves the basic difference in perspective between the standard scientific view of the social sciences and the interpretative view. Rather than argue, in this short memo, the merits of the latter as against the former, I will simply outline the major points of the interpretative view in order to show the

*May Brodbeck (who would agree with this assertion) calls this understanding₅ the meaning₂ of party identification (1963, pp. 418-423).

contrast with the more familiar standard view.*

The interpretative view begins with the notion that the defining characteristic of human action is intentionality. The familiar example is the difference between raising one's arm and having one's arm go up. The latter is a description of a bodily movement (which could, for all we know, be produced involuntarily by electric stimuli) while the former is an action which presupposes some intention (e.g., to signal, to vote on a motion, to stretch back muscles, etc.). In order to begin to explain human action we need, at the least, to identify the actions performed. This requires a knowledge of the intentions of the agent, which in turn supplies meaning.

Our actions are ordinarily characterized by the purpose sought and explained by desires, feelings, emotions. But the language by which we describe our goals, feelings, desires is also a definition of the meaning things have for us. (Taylor, 1971, p. 12)

Thus, this view of social science is crucially concerned with meaning. "The norm of explanation which it posits is one which 'makes sense' of the behavior, which shows a coherence of meaning." "We make sense of action when there is a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of his situation for him." (Taylor, 1971, pp. 17, 13)

Note that this does not mean, as some (both critics and proponents) would have it, that we are limited to the actor's intentions and interpretation of his/her own action. In the first place, "the meaning of an action is not simply what a person intends by it, just as the meaning of what a person says is not what he meant by saying it." (Moon, 1975, p. 180) In the second place, social science is not limited in scope to the study of actions, of what people do.

[S]ocial scientists are concerned with the causes and effects of being unemployed, having kin relations of a particular kind, rates of population growth, and a myriad of conditions of individuals and societies, the descriptions of which have a logical character other than that of action descriptions. (MacIntyre, 1967, p. 25)

The first consideration leads to the investigation of the conventions and "constitutive meanings" of society (cf. Taylor, 1971). The second consideration leads to

*For an explication, contrast, and critique of these two views, see Moon (1975).

the admission of causal statements (e.g., economic statements of the causes of unemployment) into our scheme of explanation. But, even granting this second point, when exploring an actor's behavior "the meaning of his situation for him" is a necessary starting point. We need to characterize the meaning of, for example, unemployment in terms of the agent's belief about his/her unemployment before investigating the possible connections between unemployment and reactions to it. Otherwise, a correlation between unemployment and a Democratic vote remains just a fact which still needs explaining. (MacIntyre, 1967, p. 28)

The implications of this view, then, include the notion that we cannot even identify "behavior" independent of the self-interpretation of the agents, and thus we would be unable to identify the variables in which we should be interested. I mentioned (supra, page 3) that I feel that party identification has already been constructed so that it is a relevant variable. This is due to the social scientists' commonsensical understanding (as Americans) of what the concept means. However, we need to go beyond the level of common sense if we are to make progress in our understanding of electoral behavior, and my questionnaire suggestions are aimed at allowing us to do this in a systematic fashion. Until we do so we will be stymied: limited to a common-sense understanding of voting and unable to validate or abandon our intuitions.

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