

COMMENTS ON ISSUES AND CANDIDATE EVALUATION

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Issues have long been recognized as a key component of political campaigns. Indeed, the *American Voter* identified them as one of the two main short-term factors influencing voters. The view of the discipline, however, as to the role of issues in determining candidate evaluation has varied over time. This changing view has been influenced both by a changing methodology for asking issue questions and a changing political environment. Today very few political scientists would contest the rather simple proposition that position issues -- issues which have a direct connection to actionable government policy and on which there is a real division of opinion -- are an important component of campaigns and electoral choice.

Democracy ultimately rests on the view that citizens can influence public policy through elections. Concern for democratic theory, combined with the realization that issues matter in elections, should make the study of issues a major focus in the NES design. Of course, interview time is limited, and this constraint leads to the inclusion of some things and the exclusion of others in developing the questionnaire. By underscoring the importance of position issues to democratic theory, our goal is simply to encourage as much depth and scope in the study of issues as possible.

Candidate Position

Once the zero-sum structure of questionnaire design is acknowledged, the effective use of interview time becomes a paramount concern. With regard to issue questions, one critical decision is whether to obtain information on how respondents perceive candidates. How important is it to know where people perceive candidates on issues?

We propose five reasons why obtaining candidate position on a broad set of issues is desirable. These are (1) linkage theories require information on candidate position, (2) campaigns try to influence perceptions, (3) perceptions are of interest in their own right, (4) perceptual variance is useful for describing political systems, and (5) perceptual accuracy is a culturally robust measure of political sophistication.

Linkage. The model that has guided researchers interested in issue voting has generally been the proximity-based spatial model. This model argues that a candidate's utility for a voter is determined by how close the candidate's issue positions are to those of the voter. Hence, the connection between voter issue position and candidate evaluation is mediated explicitly by the position the candidate takes on the issue. As an alternative model, directional theory argues that candidates stimulate evaluation on an issue by taking non-centrist stands. Voters on the candidate's side of the issue are stimulated to support her; those on the opposite side are stimulated to oppose her. The strength of the candidate's stand determines the extent to which support and opposition are excited on the basis of the issue. In directional theory as in proximity theory, the link between voter issue position and support

for a candidate is mediated by candidate position. These models are empirically distinguishable only if candidate position is known.¹

Aside from these two models, any serious theory of issue-based evaluation will depend on candidate position and/or candidate behavior as a mediating factor. If information regarding candidate position is not collected as part of the interview schedule, researchers interested in understanding the link between voter issue position and candidate evaluation will be missing a critical piece of the evaluation puzzle.

Then researchers will have to turn to other approaches. One possibility is simply to make strong assumptions about how candidate position mediates evaluation, and to deduce candidate position from the evaluation of respondents at various issue positions. This, however, leaves the conclusions of the research on a soft footing, as the linkage assumptions could be completely wrong.

Another possibility is to position candidates based on non-survey information such as platforms, speeches, advertisements, or expert evaluations. A serious difficulty with the non-survey approach is how to match the scales. Are we really placing the candidate on the same scale as the voter? Regardless of the effort taken to make the match, it is impossible to know whether the position ascribed to the candidate is a good approximation of the position the candidate occupied in the public mind.

In sum, the linkage between respondent issue position and candidate evaluation requires some knowledge of candidate position. Efforts to understand this linkage are enhanced when perceived candidate position is collected during the survey. Since understanding the linkage between issues and candidate evaluation is critical for interpreting the policy implications of the election, a failure to collect this information represents a serious shortcoming.

Campaign knowledge. How effective are political campaigns? Did the campaign convey the messages it intended? To what extent did the candidate succeed in differentiating

¹ This statement is not accurate in a strict sense. If the proximity model is correct, there can be evaluation patterns that are inconsistent with the directional model. These will be the proximity patterns for centrist candidates. If the directional model is correct, however, the directional patterns observed will be consistent with proximity patterns for extreme candidates. Hence, in the absence of data on candidate position, the directional model can be rejected but the proximity model cannot.

In this vein, we also note that if vote is the sole dependent variable of interest, the two models are indistinguishable even when candidate position is known (Macdonald and Rabinowitz 1993). This follows from the fact that differences in candidate evaluation in both the directional and proximity models are determined by differences in scalar products. The models do not make identical predictions, but they make identical predictions up to a constant transformation; and in any complex statistical model that constant is likely to be absorbed in the model itself. We make this point explicit because it clarifies the reason why it is important to ask candidate position. It is not for statistically modelling the vote; it is for understanding the processes through which issue preferences influence evaluation.

himself or herself from prior candidates representing the same party? How differentiated was the candidate from the opposition? How closely linked is the flow of information in the media to the perceived position of candidates? These questions are critical to understanding the real impact of campaigns, but they cannot be investigated without information about where the candidates are perceived to stand on the issues.

Intrinsic interest. How and why people hold the images they do of parties and candidates is a subject of intrinsic interest. An extensive literature in both psychology and political science deals with this question. But the question cannot be addressed if the dependent variable is not measured.

Variability. The consistency with which different voters place candidates is of potential interest in comparing issues and/or candidates within an election. Was Smith or Jones more clearly perceived? Does the extent of clarity depend on the particular issues involved? Is clarity related to support in some critical way? In a comparative context, do voters in the U.S. have a more or less clear image of candidates compared to voters in country Z? By broadly including questions on candidate and party perception, the discipline would gain a better understanding of how different types of democracies operate in presenting choices to voters (e.g. Granberg and Holmberg 1988).

Sophistication. Knowing where parties and candidates stand is a good measure of how much voters know about politics more generally. This is somewhat different from conventional knowledge about the political system and arguably more meaningful, because the political links are more direct. In addition, accuracy of placement lends itself well to comparative analysis, in contrast to general knowledge questions which are of necessity culturally specific. While issues differ across societies, virtually all political systems have important political issues on which parties take stands. Hence, including party and candidate placements on surveys designed for comparative purposes produces a culturally comparable measure of sophistication as a by-product (Luskin 1987).

Practical Matters

The most critical reason for including candidate perception in the questionnaire is its key role in linking issue position to evaluation. The second most critical reason is its importance in understanding the relationship between campaign behavior and mass perception. If the inclusion of such questions is desirable, what are the costs?

According to the NES staff, asking respondent position on a "typical" 7-point issue requires approximately 30 seconds. Adding on questions about candidate position requires an average of 7 seconds per question. Hence, while not cheap, perceptions are not particularly costly to gather.

There has been little recent experimentation with obtaining candidate position on issues in other formats. In 1992 NES asked a series of questions about abortion where each

question had four fixed alternatives. Both respondent position and perceived candidate position were collected. According to the NES staff, asking respondent position on the abortion question took approximately the same time as a standard 7-point question. To our knowledge, no other question format has been used to ascertain candidate position in recent NES studies.

In order to use candidate position as part of a linkage model or to study perception as a consequence of campaign strategy, it is *not* necessary to ask all respondents to position each candidate on each issue. Both proximity and directional theory, for example, assume each candidate has a single location on each issue; what researchers interested in these models need to know is what that single location is. This information could conceivably be obtained using just a subset of respondents. A sample of 400, for example, would likely produce usable, if less precise, estimates of mean candidate positions. Similarly, researchers interested in how campaign tactics influence candidate perception might be able to use single point estimates based on a small sample. This suggests that on many issues NES could obtain perceived candidate positions from a random subsample of the larger sample and still satisfy some of the most critical research needs.

There are, however, costs associated with using a split sample to place candidates on issues. Some researchers are interested in a variant of the proximity model in which the distance between the voter and the voter's perceived position of the candidate determines candidate evaluation (e.g. Merrill n.d.; Rahn, Aldrich, Borgida, and Sullivan 1990). These researchers argue that only by incorporating individual perception directly into the calculus can we know how voters actually decide. This work could not be done effectively using different subsets of the sample to place candidates.

In a model applied by Enelow and Hinich (1984), perceptions of candidate position are used to determine how voters understand the issue scales. The basic model assumes that voters have different interpretations of the scale. By using the full set of placements and assuming candidates have a single position, one can use candidate perception both to place candidates and to guide the placement of respondents in the "issue space." Asking perception questions of a subset of the sample would not provide enough information to analyze this model.

An approach which recognizes the divergent needs of the research community would be to ask all respondents to place themselves and each of the candidates on a reasonable number of issues (perhaps 7 to 12), while on other issues the sample could be partitioned so that each respondent positioned candidates on relatively few issues (perhaps 3 to 5). Following this strategy, a significant percentage of issues would carry some perceptual information about each candidate, and enough issues would have full perceptual information to allow researchers with more specific needs to pursue their theoretical interests.

Controlling Distortion

Traditionally, perceptual questions on major national election studies have been asked in a sequence which begins with respondents placing themselves, followed by respondents placing the candidates. It is well documented that people tend to distort the placement of candidates by locating candidates they like close to themselves and those they dislike farther away². Asking placement questions sequentially enhances the tendency to distort.³ Distortion based on affect should have little impact on mean candidate position, but it presents a problem for those interested in linking voter position and perceived candidate position in modeling evaluation or vote. It would be desirable to control these distorting effects by separating candidate placement questions from respondent placement. Separation is easy to achieve conceptually but it presents practical difficulties. Once respondents are thinking about an issue, asking placement questions takes relatively little time compared to starting from scratch. Nevertheless, the potential for controlling distortion makes separation a desirable goal and something that might be explored on a pilot study.

Substance of Questions

Clearly many factors should go into deciding the particular issues to include on the NES survey. In general, it seems reasonable to proceed in stages. First, consider the issues that are most germane to the current election; second, consider the issue questions on the previous surveys to see which are worth preserving. Then, in a final stage, decide on the actual set of issue questions to include.

The following criteria seem worth considering in deciding whether to add a new issue question to the survey:

- (1) Has the issue been among those high on the "most important" issue list in the last five years?
- (2) Has the issue been a substantial part of the public debate, and is the fundamental question still unresolved?
- (3) Is the issue being seriously debated by elites, and is it likely to become part of the public dialogue? Anticipating the arrival of an issue could provide theoretically interesting information.
- (4) Has the issue played a significant role in the primary campaigns?

² The literature here is extensive (e.g. Brody and Page 1972; Kinder 1978) and sometimes argumentative (e.g. Krosnick 1990). The finding, however, is pervasive.

³ We did a survey experiment in Norway in which we found that separating the responses did reduce the level of distortion. We have replicated the experiment in the U.S. but have not yet analyzed the data.

We would say any issue that gets a YES on 1 or 4 *and* a YES on 2 or 3 should be included in the survey. This will not usually be a long list, and it can readily be constructed by early March 1996.

The following criteria seem worth considering in examining the prior election survey to determine whether or not to delete an issue:

- (1) Is the issue likely to be part of the debate in the upcoming election?
- (2) Does the issue have potential for being part of future debate?
- (3) Is the issue archaic in either content or wording?

Or perhaps even a more stringent pair of questions:

- (4) Would the issue be included if this were a "single shot" election study?

If the answer is NO, then

Is the question sufficiently important for long-term analysis of political change to keep it in the current study?

Clearly a question receiving a NO to 1 and 2 and a YES to 3 should be discarded. If a question receives a NO to both parts of question 4, it probably should be discarded. In order to add questions, we need to be willing to subtract. On the other hand, once a question is on the survey, removing it seriously reduces the capacity to do over-time analysis. Hence, the bias is *and should be* for maintaining questions, and in the form the question was originally asked. But that bias should not be so great as to undermine the contemporary and future value of the study.

Even at this early stage it is worth noting some issue areas that are likely to have significance in 1996 *and* that have received either no attention or only scant attention in recent NES studies. (We have not seen the 1994 study, so questions on several of these topics might already have been included.) The general areas include crime, welfare, campaign reform, education reform, taxation levels, immigration, and a balanced budget amendment. With regard to crime, welfare, and education, each of these issues appeared in the 1992 study in a series of questions asking whether spending in that area should be increased, kept the same, or cut. There was no question on campaign reform and no question on a balanced budget amendment. There was a question on the death penalty. There was one post-election question on taxes versus spending and no question on immigration.

Some Questions

Below are some potential questions. They are included for the purpose of stirring up possible interest.

Crime

1. There are many different ways for a government to deal with crime. Each of these ways costs money that would have to come from additional taxes or cuts in other services. Tell me if you would be willing to pay more taxes to

build more jails to keep convicted criminals in jail longer?

If YES,

Would you be willing to spend quite a lot on this, or only a little?

(Now, would you be willing to pay more taxes to)

hire more police?

If YES,

Would you be willing to spend quite a lot on this, or only a little?

(And finally, would you be willing to pay more taxes to)

run training and employment programs in poor neighborhoods?

If YES,

Would you be willing to spend quite a lot on this, or only a little?

2. Some people have argued that an important way to reduce violent crime is to place strong controls on the use and sale of guns and ammunition. Other people feel that criminals will always have guns, and that putting regulations on the sale of guns and ammunition only creates problems for honest citizens. On the scale below, people who favor very strong controls on the sale of guns and ammunition are at one end, at point number 1, while those who favor having no controls whatsoever are at point number 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Welfare

1. Some people are in favor of eliminating all welfare programs for the poor. They think that government programs that provide welfare to poor people simply encourage laziness and dependency. Other people think that it is the government's responsibility to see to it that people, whether they work or not, have at least a minimum standard of living. On one end of this scale, at position 1, are those who favor providing absolutely no government welfare to poor people. At the other end of the scale, at position 7, are those who think that welfare should be provided so that poor people have at least a minimum standard of living. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Campaign Reform

1. Many people have noticed that campaigns for Congress have gotten so expensive that candidates must raise large amounts of money in order to compete. Some people feel this has made candidates too dependent on special interests and PACs and they argue the solution is to have campaigns for Congress publicly funded with tax dollars. Other people feel that no matter how many problems exist in the current system, the government should not use tax dollars to pay for Congressional campaigns. Suppose people who favor complete public funding of all campaigns for Congress are at position 1, while those who favor no public funding whatsoever are at position 7. Where would you put yourself on this scale?

Education Reform

1. Some people have recently proposed a plan for changing how schools are funded. They favor something called a voucher system. Under a voucher system, the parents of a school-age child would be given a certificate or voucher worth an amount of money about equal to what it costs the government when the child goes to public school. This voucher could be used at any school, public or private, the parent wanted. Have you heard about this plan? Would you say you favor or oppose the idea of a voucher system?

If FAVOR,

Would you say you strongly favor or just weakly favor this idea?

If OPPOSE,

Would you say you strongly oppose or just weakly oppose this idea?

Now what about Bill Clinton. Do you know how he stands on the question of vouchers?

Balanced Budget Amendment

1. Some people favor an amendment to the Constitution that would require the federal government to have a balanced budget. Other people think this is a bad idea. What about you, are you in favor or opposed to an amendment that forces the federal government to balance the budget?

Medical Care

1. There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel that the government in Washington should provide a health insurance plan that would guarantee medical care for all citizens. Other people feel that obtaining medical care is a private matter and not something the government should be involved in. And of course, others have opinions in between.

Taxation

1. The government in Washington uses tax revenue to support the military, to run government programs, and to pay the debt. Yet just how much tax money is needed is always a matter of considerable debate. Some people feel that the government in Washington can and should lower taxes. Others think that in order for the government to do what it needs to, taxes cannot be lowered, that they must be kept at least at current levels. What about you? Do you think taxes should be lowered, or should they be kept at current levels? Or do you think they should be increased?

If LOWERED,

Do you think they should be lowered a lot, or just a little?

If INCREASED,

Do you think they should be increased a lot, or just a little?

Now what about Bill Clinton,

Do you think he wants to lower taxes, keep them at the current level, or increase them?

If LOWER,

Do you think he wants to lower them a lot, or just a little?

etc.

Immigration

1. There is quite a lot of discussion these days about illegal immigration. One proposal discussed is to spend more tax money to increase border patrols to keep illegal immigrants out of the country. Do you favor or oppose that?

Do you favor (oppose) that strongly or not so strongly?

2. Another proposal is to refuse any government services, such as education and health services, to illegal immigrants. Do you favor or oppose that?

Do you favor (oppose) that strongly or not so strongly?

Now what about Bill Clinton. Do you think he favors or opposes increasing border patrols?

Do you think he favors (opposes) that strongly or not so strongly?

What about refusing government services. Do you think Bill Clinton favors or opposes that?

Do you think he favors (opposes) that strongly or not so strongly?

etc.

An Open-ended Question

What do you think Bill Clinton stands for? What will he try to do if he is reelected president?

What do you think Phil Gramm stands for? What will he try to do if he is elected president?

Side Comment: Candidate Placement Questions in 1992

Four issue questions in 1992 asked respondents to place Bush and Clinton as well as themselves. These questions dealt with government services, jobs and living standards, defense spending, and abortion. Two of these questions, jobs and living standards and defense spending, were poorly suited to the election. The jobs and living standards question is increasingly archaic; candidates today are not debating whether government should guarantee jobs and a decent standard of living. Although that is implicit in the welfare debate, it is never articulated in those terms. The defense spending question did not reflect the issue in 1992, as no candidate was proposing an increase in defense spending. Consistent with that observation, when other defense related variables were included, the question had very little impact on evaluation. Of the four questions, only the abortion question targeted an issue that was an explicit part of the campaign debate. When candidate placements are included on only a very limited set of issues, great care should be taken to select issues that are significant for the election.

Topics Related to Issue-based Evaluation

Several considerations related to the study of issues and issue-based evaluation are useful to note. These fall into three categories: (1) the placement of parties and current government policy, (2) the role of salience, and (3) the impact of question format. These topics are beyond the scope we were asked to address so we will be quite brief in considering them.

Other placements. We feel it is a good idea when asking respondents to position candidates, also to ask them to position parties and current government policy. There is considerable precedent for both in NES studies, and it seems worth the small additional cost in interview time. Parties are particularly useful for comparative work, and current policy provides a measure of a base point which is important in some models of issue voting (e.g. Grofman 1985; Miller and Shanks 1982).

Salience. Attempts to measure salience on NES studies have generally been less productive than researchers originally anticipated (e.g. Niemi and Bartels 1985). On the other hand, salience questions have never been asked in a way that encourages careful discrimination across issues. Simply asking whether an issue is important or not does not

seem to be a good measure of salience. Salience could prove more interesting if respondents used a ranking procedure to indicate which issues were most salient to them.

Format. Various question formats have been used in studying issue attitudes. Questions that can be asked and answered quickly have the great virtue of allowing wider coverage of issues than wordier questions. However, Krosnick and Berent (1993), among others, have argued that question form directly influences reliability, with branching issue questions (analogous to the standard party id question) most likely to produce consistent responses across time. In general, rapid fire sequences of questions (e.g. the spending questions) are more likely to be subject to random response than are questions that provide a more singular focus. Clearly there are tradeoffs here as elsewhere, and a fairly broad diversity in question formats seems desirable. By varying formats, reasonable scope can be achieved at the same time that theoretically interesting questions can be explored.

Four Specific Questions

The invitation to the conference posed four specific questions. We have attempted to address these, at least to some extent, in our prior remarks. It is probably useful to consider each of them explicitly as well.

Question 1. Where are we in understanding the dynamics and function of candidate placement on issues and issue-related perceptions generally?

Significant research has been devoted to understanding the mechanisms that lead to candidates being placed at a particular point on the issue scales, and to understanding the type and amount of distortion that occurs when placing candidates. Kenney (1993) provides a summary of some of the key hypotheses. Almost any reasonable hypothesis draws some support, but the actual mechanisms are not well understood.

Of interest to this general area is work by Lodge and McGraw and their associates at Stony Brook (e.g. Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). They find that individual recall of candidate issue positions is not as powerful a predictor of judgment as the actual cues to which the experimental subjects were exposed. This puts increased weight on understanding the actual cue sources voters use. Nevertheless, the recall placements provide a reasonable indication of where the candidates stood on the issues.

Of interest, too, particularly when a single estimate of candidate position is being used, is work by Powell (1989). She argues that people who guess will bias the estimate away from the true candidate position toward the center of the scale, because a purely random guess will vary around the center rather than the candidate's true position. She finds confirmation for this hypothesis.

In general, the work on distortion is further along than the work on placement. While caution is suggested in interpreting either individual or mean placements, there is strong evidence that placements convey a general sense of where candidates are perceived to stand.

Question 2. Is our purpose in honing our list of issues and placements the explanation of specific elections or are there larger theoretical issues we still need to tackle?

The purpose of honing our lists is to test and generate theory as well as to explain specific elections. At present the question of whether proximity theory, directional theory, or some mixed model best explains candidate evaluation remains controversial (e.g. Iversen 1994). And, as we have noted earlier, any serious theory of issue-based evaluation is likely to incorporate candidate position as a mediating factor. Only if we collect appropriate data on meaningful issues will we have a reasonable base from which to generate better theory.

Question 3. Is there any way to pick issues, issue questions, and placements other than making our best guess as to what's important "this year" balanced with continuity, or are there other things we must keep in mind?

We have addressed this question fairly directly in the prior discussion. Simply considering the "most important" issues over the last five years and then dropping those issues that are clearly off the current agenda should be a starting point. Given how frequently crime, medical care, and taxation have been major campaign issues, it seems wise to include each in a better format than that provided on the 1992 questionnaire.

Question 4. What more can be done, especially in light of limited space?

(1) We recommend including no fewer than 7 and as many as 12 issue questions (in addition to the Liberal-Conservative scale) that ask all respondents to place candidates, parties, and current government policy.

If we had to suggest a set of seven issues now, we would include the standard government services question, the 1992 abortion question, and questions on crime, taxation, medical care, welfare, and military power. A good case can be made for including several more placement questions on the 1996 survey. Issues such as immigration, affirmative action, environment, campaign reform, education reform, balanced budget amendment, and treatment of gays come immediately to mind. The set of issues, however, should definitely *not* be established this early, particularly if space is short.

(2) We recommend a broad commitment on the part of NES to include 10 questions in each study that are designated "single shot" questions. The sole purpose of these

questions would be to tap issues of relevance to the current campaign, with the explicit understanding that there is no commitment to continue these questions on future studies. For these issues split samples (half, third, or quarter) could be used to provide placements for the two main candidates.

Adding ten new questions would commit at most five minutes of the interview to asking people about what is being discussed in the campaign, i.e. what the election is about. Including campaign-relevant issues is essential both to understanding how issues relate to candidate evaluation and to providing an historical record of the election.

(3) Finally we recommend a regular culling of previously used questions to make sure (a) they are still relevant and (b) they are asked in a way that makes sense to contemporary respondents.

If adopted in full, our recommendations would require a total of 18.2 minutes of interview time.

13.0 minutes -- 12 issue questions on which respondents place themselves, candidates, parties, and the status quo. This assumes that each question takes approximately 1 minute and 5 seconds: 30 seconds for the initial question and 35 seconds for the five placements.

6.2 minutes -- 10 "single shot" issue questions, each taking approximately 30 seconds for self-placement and, on a half-sample basis, 14 seconds for the two candidate placements.

If necessary, the length of the survey could be decreased by a more conservative proposal.

7.6 minutes -- 7 placement questions

3.5 minutes -- 6 single shot questions with candidate placements based on a third-sample.

Recent studies have included seven or more placement questions⁴ and all studies include some single shot questions (such as the questions about the Gulf War on the 1992 survey). Therefore this proposal should be close to neutral in terms of interview time.

⁴ By our reckoning the 1972 study included 12 placement questions, 1976 included 9, 1980 included 9, 1984 included 7, and 1988 included 8. Each study also included the Liberal-Conservative scale. The 1992 study was unusual in asking only 4 placement questions.

A Final Comment

Modern elections are contests in which candidates attempt to persuade voters to support them. Candidates provide messages to which voters react. These messages often concern actionable government policy. Only by gathering information about how voters interpret these messages will we as a discipline be in a position to make sense of the process through which issues affect candidate evaluation. The goal of understanding that process is important enough both to the discipline and to the society to justify substantial time investment in the NES design.

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