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MEMORANDUM

Electoral Studies and the Voter's Paradox

I am very pleased to see that new theoretical approaches are being considered in the explanation of Michigan's survey data. Several years ago I argued that the explanations of American Presidential voting which had been proffered by Campbell and his associates, as well as those suggested earlier by Lazarsfeld and his associates were not logically consistent. (See Some Conceptual Problems of Voting Theory, enclosed). At the time I mentioned the work in the formal theory of collective choice as an alternative mode of explanation, but I did not elaborate. In my view the work in spatial models has produced some interesting results which are certainly worth considering in the attempt to understand the regularities and variations in the Michigan data.

One part of the spatial modeling literature which was not stressed in the Page-Sears memorandum,however,was the search for electoral equilibria, that is, issue positions from which no party has an incentive to deviate. One of the important results in the literature is that in a multi-dimensional world such equilibria are not to be expected. This conclusion relates to that in the literature on the voter's paradox. The voter's paradox is a situation in which a set of transitive individual preferences produces, by majority rule, a set of intransitive social preferences. In this note I would like to suggest a way in which the voter's paradox literature might be applied to the data in the Michigan electoral studies.

The point about the voter's paradox is that, if it exists, any alternative which is finally chosen must be imposed. That is, assume a group of individuals is choosing among several candidates in an election. Then, if the set of individual preferences for the candidates does not produce a transitive group ranking of the

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candidates, no candidate will be preferred by a majority of the voters to every other candidate. In more technical terms, there will be no Condorcet winner. It is possible that there would be a winner if a different vote counting procedure were used (e.g., Borda method, Copeland method, approval voting, etc.) but for present purposes we will consider only the Condorcet method which says that the winner will be that candidate which is preferred by a majority to every other alternative.

The literature on the probability of the voter's paradox (see enclosed article on "The Voter's Paradox and the Homogeneity of Individual Preference Orders") suggests that the paradox is far more prevalent than we might imagine. Such a result is important because it raises serious problems for democratic choice: if majority rule is a desired value (and, of course, we recognize that it may not be) then the voter's paradox literature suggests that it may be unobtainable even in principle. The practical problem is evident: suppose a listing of voter preferences, where majority rule and the Condorcet method were to be used, indicated the presence of social intransitivity. Then what should be done? Any candidate chosen would be a minority choice. Presumably, extensive negotiations might cause some of the voters to alter their preferences, but in large societies this would be cumbersome and, in any case, it is not clear that it would be effective even in small groups where feelings ran high. In short, if the voter's paradox exists in real polities, then it creates serious problems for democracy.

But, if the theoretical literature suggests that the voter's paradox should be prevalent, why has it not become an actual problem? There are several reasons for this. First, in American Presidential elections we usually reduce the number of

candidates to two; and, where there are only two candidates there cannot be a cyclical majority (another term for the social intransitivity of the voter's paradox). In other words, we can avoid the possibility of the paradox simply by limiting the number of candidates. It can be rightfully argued, however, that this procedure does not eliminate the paradox, but simply surpresses it. Another means of surpressing the paradox is by the manipulation of the voting procedures. Thus, we can say, for example, that we will compare the alternatives two at a time, eliminate the loser, and compare the winner to the next alternative. It is easy to show that such a procedure will always produce a result even in the presence of a cyclical majority, or when there is no Condorcet winner. These procedures for surpressing a cyclical majority, however, can only work because we rarely ask voters to list their preferences. In almost all important elections, and even in most voter surveys, we ask only for the first choice. We do this, probably, because it is practically cumbersome to provide a means for voters to list their preferences, and, I suspect, because we either expect that they will be indifferent among the alternatives which are not their first choice, or because their preferences may turn out to be intransitive. It may also be that a lack of concern with the voter's paradox as a problem in American electoral behavior contributes to the absence of such information.

For the conference on "Issue Voting and Rational Choice," then, my focus would be on the application of the voter's paradox literature to the study of the Michigan data. Toward this end my major suggestion in the data collection would be a systematic attempt to have respondents rank their candidate preferences, especially at the primary stage in Presidential elections. There are at least four questions which such data would be used to answer. First, are there cyclical majorities among voter preferences for potential Presidential candidates? Naturally, there would be a moral dilemma for political scientists if the data confirmed the theoretical prediction that cyclical majorities are empirically prevalent: what would be the

political impact of such an announcement? At that point political scientists would really have to confront the problem of research interfering in an important way with the process being studied. In any case, it would certainly enliven the political debate!

This analysis can also be extended to the question of issue voting. But, instead of asking why voters hold certain issue positions (and ignoring the dramatic evidence that voters tend to know almost nothing factual about political issues) we would ask whether the issue preferences of voters also produce cyclical majorities, and how this would relate to voter turnout and candidate preference.

Second, does the outcome of the primary selection process significantly affect turnout and candidate preference? That is, do voters whose first choices turn out to be the nominee of their party vote with greater regularity in the main election than voters whose first choice is eliminated at the primary stage? And, is there any systematic relationship between the individual ranking of the party nominee and the probability of voting in the election? Clearly, this raises the question of whether candidate ranking is a major variable in determining turnout. It also does not consider the reason for the preference order, and, as such, consciously ignores a great deal of the work in American electoral behavior and even in spatial modeling.

Third, I would like to consider the question of the homogeneity of the American electorate, at least in regard to candidate selection. In my paper on the voter's paradox and the homogeneity of individual preference orders I suggest a definition of homogeneity which is different from that of Richard Niemi or Peter Fishburn. I also show that with this definition of homogeneity the probability of the voter's paradox does not necessarily increase as the society becomes more heterogeneous. This result relates to the important traditional question of whether a society must be homogeneous in order to be politically viable and stable.

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Finally, it would be very interesting to know whether Americans vote "sincerely" or "strategically". That is, do they always vote for the candidate who is highest in their preference ranking or do they sometimes vote for a candidate lower down on their list in order to avoid an even worse outcome? This would be very nice information to have in a Humphrey-Nixon-Wallace type election, and it would also be very useful in the analysis of primaries, where strategic, or "sophisticated" voting may be important.