Memorandum for the Conference
on Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes and Rational Choice

prepared by
John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde
Michigan State University

In this memorandum, we want to offer some methodological suggestions concerning the measurement of issue preferences and perceptions for the analysis of Presidential voting behavior. It is our belief that the "7-point issue scale" technique is a theoretically appropriate and substantively useful procedure, but that the current question format has serious problems. While this memorandum is devoted to one topic, our concerns are more broad ranging. If one or both of us are selected to attend the Conference, we fully expect to contribute in several of the areas outlined in the "Stimulus Memorandum" to this Conference.

1) The Promise of the 7-point scale approach.

Cursory examination of recent literature concerned in whole or part about issues and voting behavior demonstrates that the "7-point issue scales" struck a responsive chord in the discipline. The reasons for the widespread appeal of this format are clear. Most importantly, both the "social-psychological" and the "economic-rational choice" theories of voting behavior emphasize the importance of comparing the voter's own preferences with the (perceived or actual) stands of the candidates on issues. In The American Voter, Campbell, et al, offer three by now well known conditions for an issue "to bear upon a person's vote decision" (p. 170). These same three criteria are explicitly incorporated in rational choice models in general (cf., Stratman, 1974) and spatial models in particular (cf., Davis, Hinch, Ordeshook, 1970). The "7-point scales" apparently were designed with these criteria in mind, serving

as more appropriate substitutes for earlier methods. Any proposed modification of this question format should retain measurement of the respondent's preference about, his perception of the candidates and/or parties' positions on, and his concern about the issue.

2) Some Problems with the 7-point scales

Peoples' reported preferences about issues have been argued to contain a substantial component of randomness. Converse's findings (1964; 1970) concerning issues measured in an "agree/disagree" format made the point most clearly. The 1976 election study included the 7-point scale concerning attitudes towards the federal government providing guarantees of jobs and standard of living in both the pre- and post-election surveys. These "panel" data therefore can provide one measurement of the degree of apparent randomness in responses to this question format. We are studying these data currently. Preliminary analysis indicates quite clearly that there are substantial differences between the pre- and the post-wave responses in terms of issue preference and in terms of candidate and party position perceptions. For example, the pre-post survey correlations between paired items are only moderately sized at best. Further, we have found that substantial proportions of respondents fall into each of three categories: 1. those who failed to respond to either the pre- or post-wave questions; 2. those who responded to both waves; and 3. the most problemmatic category of those who responded in one wave but not the other. Because our research is still in progress, we have not yet reached firm conclusions or interpretations. Nonetheless, it is clear that the "7-point issue scale" format is far from perfect, and we believe that some of this imperfection can be reduced by modifications in the question format.

3) What Issues are to be Measured?

One series of possible modifications revolves around the first and, to a degree, the second criteria for the relevance of issues in voting behavior. Specifically, just what issues ought to be measured? Certainly, there always will be a tension between the competing desires to have as much continuity from one election to another as possible and to measure all issues relevant to a specific election. Without belaboring an argument that cannot be resolved completely, we would like to suggest that greater emphasis than appears to be the case currently be placed on tapping at least the major issues in each election. For example, the "urban unrest" scale has been asked for three elections to date. To the extent that urban unrest is relevant at all, its meaning must have changed since its first use in 1968. More likely, it was simply irrelevant to most and therefore should be expected to measure non-attitudes. We would have preferred to have an issue scale measuring some component of foreign policy or defense (which were singled out by 10-15% of the sample as one of the "most important problems") in its place.

One of the major debates in the issue voting controversy is how to best measure what issues are truly relevant to the population and to each individual. RePass (1971) has made a strong argument that the use of open-ended questions such as "What do you think are the most important problems facing this country?" is superior to the use of pre-determined, close-ended questions. Fishbein and Coombs (1971) claim to have found that using the open-ended format in a pre-test (or first wave), selecting the items most frequently mentioned, and formulating close-ended questions to measure those items provides a nice compromise retaining flexibility and yet heightening the comparability often lost in open-ended questions.

We suggest several possibilities based on the above arguments. First, the responses to the "most important problems" questions could be followed immediately by a relevant 7-point scale series. A great percentage of the open-ended responses fall into a small number of categories, most of which can be anticipated. It would seem straightforward to formulate 10, 20, even 30, 7-point scales and have the interviewer select that one that seems most relevant to the interviewee's open-ended responses. Obviously, not all responses could be matched easily to a specific scale, but with up to three problems being mentioned, most respondents would have at least one of their most important problems matched with a 7-point scale. Second, following the line suggested by Fishbein and Coombs, more attention could be paid to respondents' view of most important problems in pre-tests, to similar types of questions reported through other surveys, and to the flow of events during the election year, per se. While we don't know the various deadlines involved, it would seem desirable to save room for one or more scale series in the interview schedules as long as possible. After all, if one asks only for the respondent's own preference and perceptions of the two candidates and parties, all that need be added at the last minute is the definition of the issue and the end points. The desire for flexibility would seem to justify last minute scurrying. Finally, respondents could be asked to select, say, three issues from a longer (15-25 item) list that they feel to be especially important. Then, they could be given appropriate 7-point scale series from these issues.

4) How Specific Should the Issues be?

A second tension of goals is that between designing questions that could be answered by the largest proportion of the sample as possible and screening out those who have no attitude about the issue. Our view is that, given both the

criteria for issue voting and our preliminary findings about the "jobs" scale, it would be desirable to "pre-screen" as fully as possible. In particular, we feel that several of the currently used scales are rather vague and that it would better serve the discipline to make definitions of the issue more specific. Obviously, one can make the issue so precise as to screen out nearly everyone or create a "stable" attitude where none really exists. Nonetheless, more definition would serve as an additional filter, making it less likely that those without formed opinions would respond. Equally important, vague wording may induce apparent randomness among those who may have true and stable opinions. This point is made by Achen (1975), and he notes that Converse found that the earlier style of issue questions were worded too simplistically for Congressional candidates to be able to respond to them meaningfully. To the extent that this problem holds, the survey question must be considered an actual detriment.

5) Should there be Modifications to the Endpoints?

We believe that there are several possible modifications of the endpoints of the scales that might strengthen the format of the question and/or reduce some of the apparent randomness in response. First, not all scales have endpoints that are necessarily opposite. For example, the endpoints for busing (bus to achieve integration vs neighborhood schools) taken by themselves may be desirable though competing goals (this may apply to urban unrest, as well). Even though most respondents probably stably come down on one side of busing and not the other, the question and endpoints well may tap two dimensions, not one. Therefore, the question itself may induce changes from one survey to the next as respondents' opinions about each dimension remain unchanged but their tradeoffs between dimensions vary. In short, the endpoints (as well as vagueness) may raise problems of multi-dimensionality. Second, specifying only the two

endpoints may leave the question too unstructured and subject to differing interpretations. Part of this problem is discussed in Aldrich and McKelvey (1977) where it is asked if perceptions of candidates at, say, 2 and 4 are really different than responses of, say, 3 and 5, respectively? Moreover, our analysis suggests that responses to the 7-point "liberal-conservative" scale appear somewhat more meaningful than those to the "jobs" scale. Part of this is due undoubtedly to differences in the dimensions being tapped. Yet this scale happens to be the only 7-point scale that defines each point. Therefore, we suggest that, where applicable, as many of the 7 points be defined as possible, providing greater "structure" to the question. The liberal-conservative scale is actually a combination of the 7-point scale/ semantic differential format and of the Likert format. This form of compromise might impose more definition and structure to the question and minimize the possibility that an intended uni-dimensional continuum could be subject to multidimensional interpretation or to interpretation of different single dimensions by different respondents. Third, the wording of the endpoints may not be appropriate for tapping the true range of mass opinion. For example, as in 1972, the "conservative" extreme was selected by most (69%) of those placing themselves on the busing scale in 1976. Certainly, most of the population would prefer keeping their children in neighborhood schools. However, there well may be useful and important shades of difference among the apparently extreme 69%. The scale itself, that is, may impose an apparent "saturation" where none really exists. One solution is to define "7" as an even more extreme position that better measures the range of opinion. Another possibility would be to define the "endpoints" as, say, responses 2 and 6, leaving points 1 and 7 uninterpreted. This procedure would allow those who feel strongly to select

1 or 7 as an even more extreme option. This procedure could minimize a fourth potential problem. The two defined endpoints and the midpoint of 4 appear to be selected disproportionately compared to the other four options (cf., Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977). These three options, much like the round numbers in the "thermometer" questions, may be "Schelling points" that are prominent in a situation of uncertainty. This gravitation towards "anchor points" may be minimized either by interpreting the "endpoints" at 2 and 6 or by interpreting as many points as possible. At any rate, we feel it to be particularly important to avoid "saturation," suggesting that busing is a "valence issue." However, this interpretation is questionable. Respondents' varying perceptions of candidates support the idea that busing may be an inadequately measured "positional" issue.

6) Are the Issues Scales Adequately Screened?

One criterion for issue voting is that the issue must arouse some minimal intensity of feeling. The phrase "or haven't you thought much about this?" is intended to discourage those who have no opinion from responding. The phrase seems to work, but can it be improved? Several of our previous suggestions should minimize the degree to which people without attitudes respond to the issue. Particularly appropriate are the suggestions of matching scales with "most important problems" responses and increased definition of the questions and/or endpoints. There are several other possibilities that may be considered. In the 1968 survey, the two scales were followed by a question intended to measure saliency. Some such question may be reinstituted, perhaps being asked first and/or being asked with categories of responses better able to distinguish variation in saliency of issues that were pre-selected on the basis of being important. Second, a question asking how much the respondent has thought about

the issue may be included. Such suggestions will not screen out respondents but may be useful for assessing whether those who feel the issue to be especiall salient and/or have thought a great deal about the issue have more stable opinions than those who do not so feel. Finally, the open-ended responses to the "most important problems" question could be coded in a fashion that would make these responses more easily matched to the 7-point scales and therefore more useful as measures of saliency than is currently true.

7) Are Candidates Perceived to be Ambiguous?

One deduction from the economic theory of voter behavior is that, under some (perhaps common) conditions, candidates may present ambiguous positions to the electorate. In this general form, the deduction of ambiguity corresponds well with common perceptions of actual candidate behavior. More to the point, if candidates are in fact ambiguous, forcing respondents to choose but a single position as the perception of the candidates' stand and treating this response as if it were stated with certainty is to distort reality.

If variation in the perception of candidate positions is traceable in part to true ambiguity, there are numerous forms such ambiguity might take. Shepsle, in an economic model (1972a, b), posits that ambiguity takes the form of a probability distribution over a range of alternative positions. While some argue that other formulations may be appropriate (cf., Page, 1976), there is indirect evidence that some respondents perceive candidates' positions as ranges of points. At least, the ICPSR codebook gives extensive details concerning their coding procedures when a range of points is circled.

We feel that the nature of ambiguity and how the extent of it may vary across issues, candidates and elections is a substantively important concept in need of study. Moreover, if citizens perceive with uncertainty whatever

the source (and indeed if they are uncertain or indifferent about their preferences) then such ambiguity should be measured as fully as possible. Again, we propose several suggestions. The most straightforward, of course, is to report those instances in which respondents volunteer a range of points as their preference or perception. For example, a two digit code consisting of the first and last points in the circled range would be a very simple way to report such ambiguity. Second, given the theoretical background and the journalistic coverage of Carter's "fuzziness," etc., it may be important to encourage reporting variable uncertainty (e.g., by saying words to the effect "at what point or at what set of points would you place. . ."). Third, each question in a 7-point scale series could be followed by a question asking how certain the respondent is of his perception or preference. Finally, since at least Shepsle's model of ambiguity deals with probability, we would like to note at this point that rough measurements of the concepts of probability and certainty/uncertainty both are possible and could prove to be very useful in many contexts (e.g., "how certain are you" of your reported perception, "how likely are you to vote" -- ". . .to vote for. . .," etc.).

8) Miscellaneous Comments and Suggestions for Implementation

We believe that the 7-point issue scale format is problemmatic to the degree to which randomness may be attributed to the format of the question, per se. Our basic assumption is that the method of measurement may affect materially that which is measured.

We (and undoubtedly others) have made a wide range of suggestions drawn from several aspects of the question format that, by themselves, might be the source of some of the observed randomness in response. The most useful and practical method of testing each suggestion is through the panel-like characteristics of the pre-post-waves employed in Presidential election year surveys,

combined with a "quasi-experimental" approach in which the set of respondents is randomly divided into "split-halves." One half would be asked the scale question in its original form in both waves, while the other half would be asked the same issue in some alternative format(s) in both waves. To aid substantive analyses of the election itself, the best compromise may be to ask the "control group" half sample the full set of issue scales in the current format, while all "experimentation" would be done on different issues asked of the second half sample. The results of this experimentation must be carefully monitored to see if they achieve their intended purpose or if they provide other useful information.

Some final suggestions include the following. A battery of questions could ask the respondent directly his confidence in his reported preferences and perception, if there have been any changes in them over the campaign, if so from what, why, in what way, and how much if at all has respondent's certainty increased or decreased? If method affects the content of measurement, multivariate studies examining issue scales along with party identification, "likes and dislikes" questions, etc., are combining at least partially non-comparable measurements. As much as possible major concepts should be measured in similar ways to test the consequences of different measurement techniques. The 7-point scale format seems most flexible and useful for this purpose. Finally, more substance could be attached to the issue scale questions. For example, each issue series might be followed by asking the respondent how likely he feels it to be that the candidate will--and will be able to--enact that program, thus tapping some aspects of perceived competence and expected effectiveness. Also, all analyses of issues, however measured, assume something like "single-peakedness" of preferences. This problemmatic assumption may begin to be addressed by following the self-placement question with some question like, "If you had to place yourself at some other point on the scale, where would that be?"

References

Achen, Christopher H., "Mass Political Attitudes and The Survey Response," American Political Science Review, December, 1975, 1218-1231.

Aldrich, John H. and Richard D. McKelvey, "A Method of Scaling with Applications to the 1968 and 1972 Presidential Elections," American Political Science Review, March, 1977, 111-130.

Campbell, Angus, et al., The American Voter (New York: Wiley, 1960).

Converse, Philip, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in Ideology and Discontent, David E. Apter, ed. (New York: Free Press, 1964).

_____, "Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue," in The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems, Edward R. Tufte , ed. (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1970).

Davis, Otto A., et al., "An Expository Development of a Mathematical Model of The Electoral Process," American Political Science Review, June, 1970, 426-448.

Fishbein, M. and F. Coombs, "Basis for Decision: An Attitudinal Approach Toward an Understanding of Voting Behavior," paper delivered at the 1971 Meetings of the American Political Science Association.

Page, Benjamin I.,"The Theory of Political Ambiguity," American Political Science Review, September, 1976, 742-752.

RePass, David, "Issue Salience and Party Choice," American Political Science Review, June, 1971, 389-400.

Shepsle, Kenneth A., "The Strategy of Ambiguity: Uncertainty and Electoral Competition," American Political Science Review, June, 1972, 555-568.

_____, "Parties, Voters, and the Risk Environment: A Mathematical Treatment of Electoral Competition under Uncertainty," in Probability Models of Collective Decision Making, Richard G. Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg, eds., (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1972).

Stratman, William C., "The Calculus of Rational Choice," Public Choice, Summer, 1975, 93-106.