

INFORMATION, PARTY LABEL AND VOTING:

MEMO TO NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES

One important strand of issue voting research has tried to apply models of information processing to individual voters. Some of the questions which derive from this perspective are of the following sort. How do voters use information to make choices in environments of risk, uncertainty and change? What short cuts do voters employ to cut the costs of information processing? How do voters deal with contradictory information and at what rate do they update their expectations and preferences? Some of this work has drawn and will continue to draw upon sources of data designed for earlier studies, but because the information processing perspective is in important ways distinct from earlier models, there maybe a need to alter data collection in ways which will better accomodate this approach. I would like to discuss one direction I think information processing models are likely to go in the next few years -- i.e., the use of party as a decision cue -- and suggest some questions which might follow from this model. Secondly, I would like to argue for the better use of open-ended questions as a way of accomodating this and any other approach scholars might choose to follow in the future.

THE STUDY OF PARTY AS A POLICY CUE

The study of party identification has been central to political research since the fifties. The idea that PID might serve

as a decision cue to the voter is not a new one: indeed Downs suggested it in his study An Economic Theory of Democracy. Still, this approach has on the whole been neglected by political scientists, and as the emphasis on policy voting has come into vogue, most of the effort has been to downplay the significance of party altogether. There are some, however, who see the possibility of extending the original suggestion by Downs into an information processing framework. The general idea is that the party label can come to be associated in the voter's mind with normal expectations about the candidates who run under that label. These normal expectations are formed by the accumulation of information about a party's behavior and positions over time. Inevitably, there will be changes in individual leaders and candidates within any one party over the years, but if there is continuity to the party's policies, voters should be able to associate the party with certain values, interests, outcomes and policies. Thus, when a candidate runs under a party label, that label becomes a piece of information about how a candidate is likely to behave in office: it is in this sense a decision cue utilized by the voter when deciding how to act.

Of course, it is not the only piece of information which voters will possess about particular candidates: the voter might also have specific information about the personality of a candidate or the issue positions he/she stands for. Moreover, the potential contradiction of generalized and specific information cues creates the possibility that individuals will defect from their normal affiliations. It is possible, therefore, to speak of the relative value of party label to

the voter in the sense that the party label will be more useful as it provides more reliable and relevant information about a particular candidate (i.e., as there is less contradictory information). It may even be possible to measure the usefulness of party label to the voter if we could come to know more about what the specific policy content of a party label was at any one moment in time. This type of investigation could prove to be very important in helping us to understand the causes of such phenomena as the decline of party identification in the American public and the weakening relation between party and the vote in congressional elections: we may find that these phenomena are related to the lessening usefulness of party as a decision cue to the American voter.

Consequently, we need to know more about the specific policy content of the party label. First, what policies, interests, outcomes and values does the public normally associate with the Democratic and Republican parties? Secondly, we need a set of questions which will uncover other sources of information for the voter outside of party label. In our work on these questions John Ferejohn and I have been able to use the open-ended party and candidate likes/dislikes questions. Certainly, any future work in this area could continue to use these questions but it might also be useful to have a more specific set of open-ended questions such as the following:

What beneficial policies and programs have the Democrats traditionally stood for?

What harmful policies and programs have the Democrats traditionally stood for?

What desirable things seem to happen when Democrats are in office?

What undesirable things seem to happen when the Democrats are in office?

Which interests and groups seem to benefit from a Democratic administration?

Which interests and groups seem to be harmed by a Democratic administration?

What desirable policies did candidate X stand for?

What undesirable policies did candidate X stand for?

What else besides candidate X's policies did you like?

What else besides candidate X's policies did you dislike?

As they are now, the general likes and dislikes questions about the parties and candidates may be too general to elicit the information we need: some more specific prompting from the questioner may be necessary to get the relevant response from the voter. The general idea is to get voters to reveal their normal associations with the party and at the same time to find out what specific information the campaign or incumbent government yields. Moreover, by following up over time with these questions we should be able to trace changes in the public's normal party images. We may find that such changes are the result of some cognitive updating process in which specific contradictory information feeds back into and then alters the normal images of the voter. This will allow us not only to model partisan defection better; but also to explain fundamental changes in the patterns of partisanship in the U.S.

THE USE OF OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

The second and related point that I would like to make concerns the use of open-ended responses. As we come to take a voter's

political preferences and expectations more seriously in accounting for his/her electoral behavior we need to obtain richer pictures of individual belief systems. Attempts to get at those beliefs through closed responses are fraught with several well known difficulties. Most importantly, there is the danger that the options and alternatives provided in the closed response will not cover all the possible answers that might be given. Important responses will be overlooked and the voter's true position may be misrepresented if, for the sake of giving an answer, the voter simply chooses the closest or least offensive response. This will create serious errors in the variables problems and downwardly bias the estimated effects. Perhaps, a more careful construction of future closed response questions -- such as providing more response alternatives, etc. -- would be a step in the right direction, but the advantages of open-ended questions should be considered seriously. To begin with, the fact that voters must suggest responses themselves provides a control for salience which would otherwise have to come from separate salience questions. Moreover, the possibility that the voter is being forced into a misrepresented position or that the response is in some important way constrained by the wording is, of course, considerably lessened.

Yet, the disadvantages of open-ended questions have proven to be as formidable as the advantages. How, for example are they to be coded? The cognitive model which generates composite net variables (i.e., those which add and subtract positive and negative mentions) leaves many of us very uncomfortable. Further, there is some evidence that the number of responses is sensitive to the level of the voter's

education, so that the measured effect may partly reflect educational biases. An alternative procedure is to try to form dummy variables from the categories, exercising judgment as to which responses should be grouped with others. In principle, I believe that this may prove feasible, but only if the open-ended question is itself specific enough to narrow the range of responses to some reasonable limit. To illustrate, the general party likes and dislikes questions which have been asked for many years get a wide -- indeed unmanageable -- number of responses. Some deal with issues, others with group interests, some with the personalities of the party's leaders, and others with more general ideological themes. When you go to group these responses, the number within any one category will be very small and this creates estimation problems if you want to use any of these created variables in sophisticated statistical procedures. I would suggest, therefore, that some attempt be made to make the open-ended question more specific than has been done to date. To take an example, the questions I suggested for the policy relevance of party label did not simply ask for the likes and dislikes of parties or candidates, but sought particular positive and negative policy or interest or outcome associations. In this way, you can cut down the number of categories of response which will be formed from the answers.

Using open-ended responses may also provide a better mechanism for delving into the origins of individuals preferences and modeling how those preferences, beliefs and expectations change over time. For example, you could have an open or closed question which asked the voter what his or her position was on X and then follow it with an

open-ended question which asked why the respondent felt that way. Similarly, if a particular issue was prominent over a series of elections, one could ask respondents whether they felt that their position had changed over time, and then if so, why. The sorts of responses that one would get in both cases might include specific references to salient events, new information which the respondent now claimed to possess, references to general ideology and values, or references to trust in the opinion of others. The point is that a more widespread use of open-ended questions would:

- 1.) Accomodate a wide variety of perspectives (not simply rational or information processing),
- 2.) It would enable us to get at questions which hitherto have been ignored (such as the origin of individual preferences and the way in which individuals update their opinions), and
- 3.) If asked properly, it would cause less measurement distortion.