

October 10, 1977

To: Board of Overseers
National Election Studies
P.O. Box Z
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From: Steven H. Chaffee, Vilas Research Professor

Dear Colleagues:

I would be interested in attending the January 19-20 conference on "Issue voting, cognitive processes and rational choice." My interest stems largely, although not exclusively, from my studies of the role of the news media in political processes. Since the Lazarsfeld-Berelson panel studies of the 1940s, the power of the media had been thought to be limited due to factors within the individual voter. On the one hand there were many apathetic voters, who paid little attention to press reports of the campaign and so were affected only indirectly, via interpersonal sources; and then there were the highly interested, partisan voters, who followed the news closely but interpreted it quite selectively in favor of the candidate to whom they were committed from the start. All of this was discouraging to students of the press, which in traditional democratic theory was supposed to provide the information base on which voters would predict their electoral decisions. It was also apparently discouraging to SRC/CPS, which until 1974 had very few items dealing with the news media in their election questionnaires.

Several factors account for the recent re-emergence of mass communication factors in the empirical literature on political behavior. One is the historical decline in party identification, and the emergence of television and new methods of campaigning. Other factors can be attributed more directly to the research community: improved specification of mass communication stimuli; a growing concern with cognitive, as distinct from affective, effects of the media; and analytical techniques for testing causal hypotheses from non-experimental field studies. Finally, there has been some resurgence of interest in the media in research funding circles.

But the research to date has at most documented a presumptive case for inferring an important link between political news coverage and the quality of the voting decision. It has been found, for example, that the diversity of responses to open-ended questions (1974 CPS survey) on the nation's "most important problems" is greater in communities where there are competing newspapers rather than a one-newspaper monopoly (Chaffee and Wilson, 1976); but it remains to be determined whether that diversity of

viewpoints produces a more comprehensive set of considerations that are weighed in the voter's mind. In the 1976 election, attention to campaign news was associated with a delaying of the choice between Ford and Carter, and with an increasing level of confidence in governmental institutions (Chaffee and Dennis, 1977); but such occurrences may have been peculiar to that year, when the majority party had nominated a relative unknown, and which followed an era in which the national government's prestige had fallen to an unprecedented low.

The conditions that encourage a voter to delay a decision until well into the campaign, or to modify her/his esteem for governmental institutions as a consequence of the campaign, are certainly not understood at this juncture. Indeed, we are scarcely in a position to hypothesize about such things given the state of current theory. Homeostatic theories such as dissonance are much more compatible with a limited-effects model of mass communication; they are unlikely to serve as very useful predictors of decision-making, stressing as they do the assumption that the person is already committed to a decision and is as likely to modify his subsequent perceptions of situations as those situations are to modify his prior decision. Theories that focus on the ways in which different kinds of politically relevant information are structured, and their validity tested through various information sources, would seem more promising. As theory stands in this area, though, we have little more than rough nominal categorizations such as "issue" and "image" to guide data collection and analysis.

The concept of issue voting has not been very satisfactorily explicated to date. The general practice has been for the researcher to identify (by reference to current press reports) some broad areas of public policy that appear to be independent of the attributes of particular candidates. Distances perceived between the voter and the candidates are then used to predict the direction of the vote. The predictive power of this kind of index has grown as its measurement has been expanded and refined, and as the major parties have become less distinct in terms of the socio economic strata to which they appeal. But we have very little understanding of the ways in which a voter's issue positions are determined; how some issues become more salient in the vote-decision process than others, or how these factors control his seeking and interpretation of political information. It seems intuitively obvious that the news media are thoroughly involved in such processes, but we have only a handful of labels such as "agenda setting" and "anticipatory socialization" to guide our thinking. It would be fatuous to assert that a full and penetrating understanding of these matters will emerge from any single study, but it seems undeniable that the national election study series is one necessary locus of investigation.

Aside from the obvious matter of items that might be included in the CPS questionnaire, there are two design features that would be important from my perspective. One is the inclusion of younger (pre-voting age) persons in the sample. Having done some research on effects of mass media in political socialization (Chaffee, Ward and Tipton, 1970; Chaffee, Jackson-Beeck, Durall and Wilson, 1977), I would very much like to see this area

strengthened by incorporation into the election study series; I understand that adolescents down to age 14 are to be sampled in the future. This broadened age range would also provide an opportunity to extend comparative studies of young vs. older voters, which to date have been based on only local samples (e.g. Chaffee and Becker, 1975).

The second aspect of design is panel. Two kinds of panels are possible in the CPS series: long-term panels, in which the same respondents are interviewed upon the occasions of several elections spaced two or four years apart; and short-term panels, in which the same respondents are interviewed at several points before, during and after a single election. There has been a good deal of argument over the relative merits of each design; the long-term panel is the more compatible with most of the strategies that feed into CPS design-making. The issue should be considered an empirical one: which type of panel can yield the greatest increment of new knowledge? This is a question I would like to discuss with knowledgeable students of political behavior. My own thinking at this point is that the long-term panel is probably better suited for socialization studies, but the short-term panel fits the needs of mass communication effects research. Much of the impact of communication events is immediate, and may be lost if it is not captured in an interview that occurs prior to the vote decision. Most studies of the 1976 presidential debates, for example, used short-term panels in the pre-election period to isolate effects of the debates on various indices of political behavior.

It is certainly arguable that long-term effects are more important, and the effort to conceptualize them would undoubtedly produce variables of greater generality than is now to be found in the mass communication literature. Research on political mass communication has tended to neglect system-level concepts (Chaffee, 1975), focusing instead on the particularistic and the transitory. This is partly attributable to the way in which mass communication effects research has typically been funded--either by a sponsor with highly particular goals in mind, or else very minimally funded (e.g. class projects, short telephone surveys). The greatest contribution of the CPS studies over the years, in my view, has been the development of broad generic concepts that can be used to describe electoral behavior across a variety of settings. The field of mass communication research stands in great need of a similar infusion of useful empirical concepts, and integration into the CPS series would seem to be an obvious way to get there from here.

I recognize that concern for the field of mass communication research is not uppermost in the minds of most participants in the National Election Studies project. The main goal of the conference is to build the strongest possible study design for coming elections, in the areas designated; of these, I submit that mass communication has a very direct relationship to at least two of the three, i.e. issue voting and rational choice. Research to date has not done a very good job of specifying and analyzing that relationship. I'm confident we can do better.

References

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