

FROM JACK CITRIN: RETURNING ISSUES TO THE STUDY OF ISSUE VOTING

Debating the meaning and extent of issue voting is now the dominant activity of students of American electoral behavior. Unfortunately, the focus of this debate seems to have shifted from its original concerns with the quality of public thinking about politics and the representative nature of electoral outcomes to a scholastic preoccupation with choosing a winner among rival predictors of the individual's vote. At periodic intervals, issue orientation, candidate preference, and party identification are awarded first, second, or third place in this contest, only to have the result questioned by a different researcher and then reversed at a subsequent competition. My own view is that this is a sterile enterprise. What needs to be understood is the process by which beliefs and attitudes relevant to the electoral choice are formed and then linked to behavior. The preoccupation with prediction, however, seems to lead to the conceptualization of explanatory variables increasingly "close" to the dependent vote itself. Recent reports that projected candidate performance and judgments about how well the incumbent President is handling his job are powerful predictors of voting intention make a contribution no doubt, but hardly an important one. Similarly, the observed recent rise in issue voting is due at least in part to the fact that the later election studies have employed measures of issue orientation that stress the affective rather than the cognitive component of attitudes and that incorporate references to the candidates, thereby intruding the same stimulus into the operational definitions of cause and effect.

Several of these problems are recognized in the Sears-Page memo you have circulated. In particular, the several references to the difficulty of distinguishing an "issue" from a "candidate" or a "rationalized" vote express concerns that I share. This brief document can do little more than

list a few topics for future research; hopefully, the upcoming conference will provide an opportunity for elaborating on the ideas mentioned below.

1. The status of the party identification concept

An issue vote is usually contrasted to a party vote, which refers, in the extreme but diagnostic case, to choosing the candidate of one's long-standing partisan predisposition notwithstanding the fact that one disagrees with the party's nominee on salient issues. In short, at the limit, a party vote amounts to acting on the premise of "my party, right or wrong." The nature of the main American political parties--fragmented in organization, heterogeneous in social composition, irregular in activity, and electoral in purpose--makes it unlikely that many of their partisans will be so devoted. Our political reality is that "my party" rarely speaks with one voice, and our political culture legitimates "voting for the man, not the party," and our system of government furnishes the opportunity to do both.

This suggests several avenues for future research. First, we need to reassess the reliability and validity of the traditional measure of party identification. Brody's recent analysis indicates that the classic two-item indicator fails to provide a sound estimate of the intensity of partisanship. In the same vein, Wolfinger and his colleagues have questioned the practice of treating each step along the seven-point party identification continuum as involving a monotonic change in pro-Democratic (or Republican) feeling. And Crewe has argued that identifying with a party can have several distinct meanings. It might mean, for example, that one believes that party A is the best of all possible alternatives, the best of all available alternatives, or merely the lesser of several evils. The Independent Leaners who apparently act as partisans might, therefore, be viewed as citizens who prefer party A to B or C, but would adhere to party D were it to exist. A more extended series of questions concerning the intensity of one's general

partisan orientation, the subjective meaning of that orientation, beliefs about the value of partisanship, and attitudes toward the party system would be useful.

Second, we should encourage a greater integration of research on Presidential and non-Presidential races. Earlier studies suggest that the cognitive foundations of the voter's decision vary according to the electoral context. Normative judgments about which factors are the appropriate criteria for choice might also vary and similarly influence the way in which conflicts between partisan and ideological forces are resolved.

Third, we require a sustained assault on the thorny question of when and how partisan ties shape issue stands. It is frequently claimed that party identification acts as an economizing device that voters employ to form opinions on public issues about which they have limited information. For evidence, advocates of this position point to the greater proximity (both objective and subjective) of one's policy preferences to those of his party. But this is at best indirect evidence and subject to the usual ambiguity concerning the direction of causal influence. Moreover, it should be obvious that the correlation between party identification and issue stance is quite compatible with a process of opinion formation in which the crucial reference groups attachments do not involve the political party. Take, for example, someone whose political guide is Ralph Nader. The issue of whether or not to allow offshore drilling for oil arises. What does our hypothetical citizen do? He remains undecided until Nader issues a bulletin advocating a negative position. Our man falls in line, not even thinking about whether the Democratic party, to which he has adhered from birth, agrees. Some months later, questioned by an ISR interviewer, he reveals his position and states, accurately let us say, that the Democratic party's position and his are identical. Has party identification functioned as an economizing device?

2. The morphology of public beliefs about issues

Determining the mutual influences of partisan sentiments and issue preferences is one facet of the general question of how opinions relevant to electoral choice are formed. Because addressing this question necessitates studying how opinions emerge, crystalize, and change, it calls for a panel of respondents to be interviewed several times. Because we are interested in the impact of candidate behavior and events during the campaign on these opinions, it calls for the measurement of opinions in the pre-convention and even pre-primary phase as well. As to the substantive focus of these interviews, the election studies of the past provide a useful foundation to build on. The following appear to be the essential building blocks:

a. The salience of issues and the development of an issue agenda

On theoretical grounds, one expects the influence of issue stands on voting and other behaviors to vary with the salience or centrality of the issue to a voter's concerns. Previous election studies have attempted to get at the salience of issues to voters by asking them to name the "most important" problems facing themselves and the nation. In addition, respondents are asked whether they have "heard" of an issue, before they are requested to place themselves on the ubiquitous seven-point continuum. These are helpful practices, but they might well be supplemented by a more systematic effort to measure salience by presenting lists of issues to be ranked, by asking whether or not the respondent spends much time thinking or talking about the issues, and by trying to determine the sources of his interest and knowledge about the issues. On this latter point, Downs has argued that issues have a characteristic lifecycle, beginning with a small active minority articulating a grievance, moving through a mobilization phase that can include an election centering on the issue, to legislation, and implementation. He argues further that public interest in an issue peaks in the mobilization phase and then declines. What is worth knowing, it seems to me, is

how the public's issue agenda develops. To what extent does it precede the campaign and to what extent does a candidate shape the public's agenda so that it coincides with his own? What experiences and communications arouse interest and raise the salience of an issue? (In this regard, the distinction between mediated and unmediated learning appears worth pursuing.) There seems no harm in asking respondents why they feel a particular issue is important and how they came to this opinion. Moreover, a panel study would enable researchers to trace trends in the composition of the issue agenda over time.

b. The informational content of issue preferences

Despite a commendable concern with distinguishing attitudes from non-attitudes by standard screening devices, the election studies have paid relatively little attention to estimating the respondent's knowledge about relevant issue domains. Time constraints might be the main reason for this inattention, but the resulting lacuna is an important one. With respect to the main issues of the campaign at least, an effort should be made to probe the respondent's level of information, as well as his interpretation of such multifaceted issues as "affirmative action" or "busing."

c. The direction of issue preferences

Here, I have two concerns. First, the intensity of preferences as well as their direction should be assessed. Second, and more important, I believe that we should go beyond simply assessing the broad general direction of policy preferences with references to a hypothetical liberal-conservative continuum. As noted previously, the reliance on this approach has led, among other things, to systematically inflated estimates of issue constraint and derivatively, of ideological polarization in the American electorate. Respondents should be provided with choices between several concrete policies--which, I suppose, means going back to earlier question format, though I would hope that too could be improved. In addition, an effort should

be made to develop measurement techniques that confront respondents with hard choices between realizing one of their values at the expense of others. One suggestion here is most relevant to the issue of priorities in government spending. A budgetary pie reflecting the status quo might be presented along with the invitation to redraw it. A similar operation could focus on the voter's preferences concerning not the amount of his taxes but their source.

d. The issue of public expectations

Recent writing on political attitudes and behavior has emphasized the role of expectations in determining feelings of satisfaction or antagonism toward established authorities and institutions. We are frequently told that a defect of the democratic process of selecting leaders is that it creates incentives for politicians to promise more than they can ever deliver, thereby raising expectations that are sure to be dashed in the long-run and that can only be met in the short-run by a heavy dose of inflation. Yet we know quite little about what the public expects of government--either with respect to the scope of its activity or with respect to the attributes of satisfactory performance. This is an area that previous election studies have touched on only briefly, but it is one that researchers with interests that go beyond issue voting to system support obviously should explore.

e. Personal experience and political response

An accumulating body of recent studies have shown that political responses ranging from presidential voting to political cynicism are founded on perceptions of events and outcomes with collective significance rather than on reactions to one's personal situation. Put in another way, in several contexts the influence of self-interest, defined in terms of tangible, relatively short-run consequences for one's own or one's family's situation is less significant than that of attitudes toward the status of larger social groups, including the community at large.

These findings both contradict conventional wisdom and raise again what Converse has termed one of social science's most recalcitrant problems--the linkage of personal experience to political outcomes. The question of issue voting can be broadened to encompass this concern with the conditions under which the individual links his personal interests with political events. It can be readily accepted that for many individuals the domains of private experience and public events are compartmentalized. But when are private discontents politicized? Does this vary with the nature of the discontents, the individual's ideological orientation, self-esteem, the existence of like-minded individuals in his social milieu, the presence of mobilizing organizations or candidates? Again, previous studies provide the germ of an answer to these questions and a set of items which can be refined and expanded.

3. Some common themes

The above remarks are not intended as either an exhaustive list of questions in the issue voting area or as a definitive set of answers. They are, rather, an introductory statement of concerns that I view as quite compatible with the thrust of the past election studies. Several common threads do, however, run through this statement. First, there is a preoccupation with cognitive components of attitudes. Second, there is a concern with the process of learning, with the stimuli that elicit a respondent's attention to public issues and the sources of his opinion. In this regard, I am particularly interested in determining the role of party, candidate, and other potential reference groups or individuals. Here too lies the importance of a panel study that begins before the completion of the nomination process. Finally, there is a conviction that we need to reassess how we measure traditional concepts. On this point, as elsewhere, I am merely echoing the Sears-Page memo. But I think I am more definite in my belief that a multi-method approach to measuring both issue orientations and party identification would be warranted.