

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

FROM: Lutz Erbring

SUBJECT: Perceptions and Evaluations of Government Policy Outputs

When political scientists study cognitive processes or rational choice, their analyses are inevitably predicated on the assumption that these individual-level behaviors are somehow connected with the system-level outcomes or conditions which provide the ultimate reference point of their concerns: government policy. However, that connection cannot be treated as a matter of assumption; it is, above all, an object of inquiry, and there is little justification for micro models, data, or analyses whose connection with macro consequences--or causes--remains implicit, or less. In short, there is reason to insist on explicit formulations of micro-macro--or macro-micro--linkage to guide our research endeavors, in the study of electoral processes and elsewhere. It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider how the national election studies might help to provide new opportunities for future research on electoral behavior in a system-oriented rather than voter-oriented framework.

It might appear that the macro relevance of our micro models, data, and analyses of voting behavior is self-evident and needs no defense; after all, electoral research is concerned with voter choice, and voter choice in the aggregate determines government policy. But does it? Voter choice, literally, determines governmental office-holding--not policy (aside from occasional rhetoric of popular "mandates"). To imply otherwise is to substitute a priori definitions for empirical questions. True, voter choice may determine governmental policy outputs if the actual policies implemented by one set of contenders for office would, in fact, differ from those implemented by another (i.e., implemented, not: advocated). Yet there is much uncertainty about this, especially among voters.* Studies of voter information processing or decision-making, therefore, which do not include measures of government policy outputs (as opposed to candidate or party policy positions) must, in V.O.Key's words, remain "bootless".

*) Asked whether "it doesn't really make much difference whether the Democrats or the Republicans run the government in Washington", as many as 60% of a random sample of Ann Arbor residents agreed that it makes NO difference. Even the usual question about important differences between the parties as such, asked in the election studies, yields as much as 50% "no" responses.

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Questions of public opinion-public policy "linkages" (in either direction) cannot, of course, be addressed on the basis of sample surveys of citizens; we simply do not have (and have never really tried to develop) exogenous measurements of governmental policy outputs (except in the crude and problematic form of budget data), though indicators based on media content ("events", news reporting about government actions) or on policy impact or lack thereof (unemployment, crime rates, etc.) might be explored. But then, we need not limit our focus to objective data; subjective, perceptual data concerning governmental policy output may serve our purpose, especially in the context of the voter's decision situation. Yet we have never really asked respondents about their perceptions of actual government policies--only about perceptions of policy positions imputed to candidates or parties (an observer from Mars might have difficulty inferring the role of the government from election study questionnaires). True, voter perceptions of an incumbent's issue positions may well be based, at least in part, on perceptions of the actual record; but that does not make the two interchangeable, and the relationship between them is surely a legitimate research question in its own right.

What is more, we lack data not only on perceptions of government policy outputs; we also have never systematically asked respondents about their evaluations of government policies--only about their own hypothetical policy preferences.^{*} Yet citizens may be satisfied or dissatisfied with actual government policies (the only ones available to the public); moreover, voters may credit or blame the President, the Congress, or even their representatives for "government" policies, and perhaps evaluation of performance or "retrospective" voting (the only kind based on facts) is what elections are all about (voters either "throw the rascals out" or "know a good thing when they see one"). True, voter satisfaction with actual (or potential) policies may well be based, at least in part, on the "proximity" of their own policy preferences to the perceived policy positions of an incumbent (or challenger); but again that does not make

^{*}) There are occasional exceptions, e.g., the President's handling of his job (mis-labeled "popularity" by the pollsters); Johnson's handling of the Vietnam situation; the government's job in handling economic policy; or (almost) Civil Rights as being pushed too fast or too slow by--alas--"the Civil Rights people" rather than the Government.

issue proximity and policy satisfaction interchangeable, and the relationship between them remains a legitimate research question in its own right (unless, of course, one takes as axiomatic that elections = preference aggregation). In part perhaps because data on policy perceptions and evaluations have thus far been unavailable, spatial modeling efforts have developed in what appears to be an unnecessarily narrow perspective; certainly the models inspired by Downs permit--indeed require--data on satisfaction with past governmental performance, if only in the context of the voter's information costs.

Once the role of perceptions and evaluations of governmental policy performance is brought into focus, the question of where they originate and how they are formed and transformed deserves to be pursued as well. Indeed this is but one aspect of a broader research focus which has not been given enough attention in past model building and data collection efforts: government policy as an independent rather than dependent variable in the electoral process, at least at the micro level.* The mechanisms underlying policy perceptions and evaluations are likely to include direct personal experience, news media reporting, and informal social communication; and the questions which await answers from future research concern not merely the relative importance of these different sources (which is likely to change from issue to issue and from election to election, just as is true for the "relative importance" of candidate, issues, and party in explaining the vote)--but the conditions and the manner in which the different mechanisms operate and interact. Again this research focus has direct implications for the design of future election studies.

A sample survey of the electorate cannot, of course, provide objective data on conditions in the respondent's primary environment, content in the respondent's news sources, or the political climate in the respondent's network of social interaction. While it may be possible to extend the design of future studies in order to obtain exogeneous measurements

*) Ultimately a model of the electoral process must no doubt be viewed in nonrecursive terms (policy outputs - electoral choice - policy outputs, but thus far only some of the highly aggregate work on the politics of macro-economic policy has begun to move in that direction.

for each class of variables (e.g., through linked data on crime, unemployment, integration; through parallel monitoring of news media content; and through snowball sampling designs, respectively), it seems questionable whether the substantial costs involved are warranted. As before, it would appear that reliance on subjective, perceptual data is justifiable in the context of the voter's decision situation. Thus, questions on financial experiences, unemployment experiences, crime victimization, racial composition etc. allow the respondent to serve as the relevant information source concerning his/her own experience with the impact (or lack thereof) of government policies. Similarly, respondents can be asked directly whether they recall any news about ..., where and how long ago, whether good or bad, or what; this approach even has the advantage of using the respondent's own perceptual screen for salience in terms of selective attention, emphasis, and recall.* Finally, even informal communication behavior can be assessed in terms of frequency of conversations, number of persons involved, types of partners, active or passive involvement, and topics discussed or agreement and disagreement (e.g., with respect to the most recent instance recalled); what evidence we do have strongly suggests the need for a revival of research into the contextual, social interaction-based sources of perceptions, evaluations, and behavior.†

In sum, I submit that a major dimension of electoral behavior which has been addressed by theoretical models of voter choice but not incorporated in past data collections deserves to be given serious consideration at a time when the future resource for research in this area is being re-examined: public perceptions and evaluations of government policy output. Both their impact on voter decision-making and their origins in the voter's environment and experience must no longer remain unexplored; however, the ability to proceed with such a line of inquiry requires data which only the national election studies can provide and which are otherwise compatible with the overall design of past CPS election surveys.

*) This strategy has been successfully employed for many years in the SRC Surveys of Consumer Expectations (has respondent heard any news about the economy lately? was it good or bad news?)

†) Two recent examples: dramatic impact on salience of emerging issues (recession; Ford pardon) in 1974 agenda-setting study; only Democrats who talk about politics favor gas price regulation bill (in Ann Arbor, last month)!
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