RESPONSE TO THE PAGE- SEARS MEMORANDUM

ON ISSUE VOTING

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Instrumentation

Much of the current debate over issue voting concerns the extent to which the issue involvement of the American electorate has changed over the past twenty years. Although the evidence appears to show substantial growth in issue voting and issue consistency (with 1964 as the rough breakpoint), one can make the case that part of this evident change could be an artifact of improved survey instrumentation by the SRC/CPS. Put simply, improved measures of issue positions produce stronger correlations. We do know that SRC/CPS measurement of issue attitudes has changed from 1956-60 (agree/disagree) to 1964-68 (choice between stated alternatives) to 1972-76 (seven-point scales). (The measures of perceived party differences have changed concommitantly with the changes in the issue measures.)

To the extent Americans have become more issue oriented since the 1950's, the change should be evident from the application of idential instruments over the years. Recently, the SRC's 1950's issue items have been administered to a Twin Cities sample (Sullivan et al., "Ideological Constraint in the Mass Public") and to a national NORC sample (Bishop et al., "The Changing Structure of Mass Belief Systems: Facts or Artifacts?") In each case, the interitem correlations averaged about the same as for the 1950's SRC national samples, suggesting there has been little growth in issue consistency and that the 1950's items were considerably less reliable than the more recent CPS issue items.

The possibility that interpretations of electoral change are contaminated by changing instrumentations can be investigated further by including some pre-1964 agree/disagree items in future CPS surveys. Given differing interpretations of changing perceptions of party differences (Margolis vs. Pomper) it may also be useful to include pre-1964 items dealing with party differences in future CPS surveys.

Causal Feedback

Recent literature on issue voting has been sensitive to the feedback problem: the possibility that the vote decisions may, via rationalization, influence responses to the closed- or open-ended measures of issue position, the presumed independent variables. Researchers should also be concerned whether voting decisions influence other presumed independent variables (such as party identification) and whether causal relationships among independent variables (issues, party identification, candidate image) are more complex than the arbitrary causal assumptions imposed by conventional causal modelling would have us suppose.

The typical methodological solutions offered for these feedback problems are panel data analysis and/or simultaneous equation techniques. I am not very sanguine about the potential of either option. After having devoted considerable study to the relationships among variables at different time points in the 1956-60 panel, I am convinced panel data does not provide an easy handle. Without correcting for reliability, conventional path analysis of the 1956-60 panel data must be seriously misspecified. With an attempted reliability correction, there appear to be no dynamics whatsoever. The basic raw evidence is that any two variables are correlated with each other by about the same amount no matter

what the chosen time lage between observations. Either nothing influences anything in the short-run (implying a "big-bang" theory of why electoral variables correlate) or the methodology is wrong. My guess is that the '72-'76 panel will present similar difficulties for making causal estimates.

Simultaneous equation techniques depend on the appropriate selection of exogenous variables that fit necessary causal assumptions. The trade-off for getting estimates of causal feedback is the danger of serious misspecification. The simultaneous equation applications to voting data I have seen appear to be unable to avoid this danger. I have given some thought about appropriate exogenous variables, but have come up blank. Ideally, some background variables on the order of "exposure to rainfall" would be found that are plausibly causes of either issue stances or voting decisions, but not the other. Participants at the forthcoming conference should look critically at the possibilities.

The Vote Decision as a Dichotomy

A problem with doing multivariate analysis of voting is that the dependent variable, the voting decision, is a dichotomy. It has long been recognized by methodologists in other disciplines that least squares regression is inappropriate for a dichotomous dependent variable. At the worst, the functional forms of causal relationships may be seriously misspecified. At the very least, least squares regression gives a misleading picture of our ability to predict voting behavior. Compare the maximum R^2 of about .65 that can be obtained from regression equations predicting voting decisions from a kitchen sink-ful of independent variables with the 90 percent plus rate of prediction that can be obtained from Kelley and

Mirer's simply "decision rule."

While we wait for the alternative technologies of loglinear modelling and probit to become more generally available, I urge a simple innovation in the survey instrument: measure the vote decision as a quasi-interval scale. Popkin et al.'s APSR article provides an example of such an innovation, measuring vote choice on a seven point scale from +3 (very favorable to the Democratic candidate) to 3- (very favorable to the Republican candidate).

The Proximity Scales

The proximity scales, on which voters are asked to place themselves and the presidential candidates on seven-point issue scales from left to right, have been welcome additions to recent CPS election studies. One gap, however, is the absence of any measure of issue salience (e.g., how important is the issue for deciding how to vote). Only the incomplete 1968 proximity items contain a salience measure. The utility of salience measures is illustrated by the following example. Suppose a researcher uses proximity scales to test the rational-choice proposition that voters pick the candidate closest to their views, summed over issues. Without a salience measure, the researcher must assume identical weights for all voters for all issues or derive relative weights for different issues from their predictive power, under the assumption that the relative weights for different issues are the same for each voter.

Salience measures would also provide some test for the prevalence of rationalization masquerading as issue voting. If issue stances cause voting, proximity scores could predict votes best on the most salient issues. Rationalization, however, would presumably result in issue-vote

relationships that are equally strong regardless of the salience of the issue.

Asking Voters for Their Reasons

Conventional open-ended issue questions ask for party and candidate likes and dislikes and for the most important issues. One simply addition would be to ask pre-election respondents the reasons for their intended votes and/or ask post-election respondents the reasons why they voted the way they did. (The post-election version was used once, in the 1968 CPS survey.)

Although many attitudinal measures correlate with voting decisions, the reasons people volunteer for their decisions might be interpreted as indicators of the most proximate causes of their voting decisions. In any case, the reasons people give might lead to conclusions different from the interpretations of the usual correlation analysis. Recall, for example, Epstein's study of Wisconsin gubernatorial voting, in which positions on the prominent issue of taxation policy correlated with voting decisions, yet few respondents said tax policy was an important reason for their decisions.

A "reactionary" proposal: Include the F-scale

From talking with colleagues who put it in their surveys and from my own informed classroom surveys, I am struck by the fact that a short version of the F-scale, originally intended to measure "authoritarianism," is an excellent predictor of presidential preference. For example, with a short F-scale with half the items reversed, I have obtained virtually perfect correlations between high and low F-scale scores and recalled 1976 vote preferences in classroom surveys at two universities. It is

a reasonable hunch that F-scale scores might be a fairly good predictor of presidential voting in a national sample at least with certain controls.

If the F-scale "works," it would mean that voters are influenced by a form of attitudinal liberalism/conservatism that causally precedes stands on specific campaign issues. Moreover, evidence that F-scale scores predict votes would not be subject to the causal interpretation of rationalization: votes are not likely to rationalize Republican votes by deliberately scoring high on the F-scale items.

For these reasons, I suggest including a short F-scale in future election surveys, perhaps taking the 10 item version used in the 1956 SRC survey, which includes 5 reversed items. (Although the F-scale may not have predicted votes in 1956, policy issues apparently did not either.)

A plea for continuity

Any additions to the CPS survey relevant to issue voting should not preclude the retention of old items relevant to issue voting. In particular, I urge the retention of the likes/dislikes questions. They may not be perfect, but they are the only issue items we have that go back to the 1950's.