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Nov. 13, 1977

To: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

From: Susan B. Hansen

Re: Memorandum of interest for conference on "Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes, and Rational Choice," Stanford University, January 1978

The analysis of issue voting must begin by determing voters' positions on various issues. Previous SRC election studies have experimented with a variety of question formats and scales to determine how respondents feel about various issues. These "closed-ended" approaches have been supplemented with open-ended evaluations of candidates and parties and with questions such as "What do you think is the most important issue facing the country today?"

For some undetermined number of voters, one issue may be of such overwhelming importance that his or her vote is cast on that basis alone. The relationship between any given issue and the vote can be easily examined. Yet few elections are settled on the basis of one issue. For most voters, a choice must be made among candidates offering differing positions on several issues. But previous SRC surveys have not dealt adequately with the problem of tradeoffs among issues. Voters' positions on two or more issues considered simultaneously can of course be analyzed by using spatial models as simple as the cells of a 2 x 2 table, or a sophisticated as a factor analysis of many issue responses. With such methods, however, the analyst determines a voter's position in N-dimensional issue space; voters themselves are not given an explicit choice.

A problem of questionnaire design and analysis meriting attention at the Stanford conference is that of getting respondents to locate themselves in "issue space" -- to make direct choices out of which indifference curves and utility functions might be constructed. Such an approach would improve on the usual method of inferring issue interrelationships from correlation coefficients. It would tell us more about people's choice processes in elections, and should also contribute to our understanding of candidates' strategic choices concerning issue positions and priorities.

One way of forcing such choices is to use the constraint of taxes to induce respondents to make tradeoffs. In the absence of a tax constraint, survey respondents (like most of us) tend to avoid conflict, to want more of everything, and to try to maximize many values simultaneously. Economists have long used budget constraints in analyzing utility functions in private-market decision models; a tax constraint is the appropriate analogy for the analysis of preferences for collective goods.

Several "tax constraint" approaches have been attempted and have been at least partially successful. Each approach also involves problems, however; some further experimentation on future SRC studies or pretests will probably be necessary before we can be confident of the results. One of the more promising approaches is the "budget pie" concept, pioneered by Terry N. Clark and tested empirically in surveys in Los Angeles, Indianapolis, and North Carolina. The respondent is shown a circular diagram and given a short list of issues (three or four; the issues could be those mentioned by the respondent in earlier open-ended questions, or could be drawn up by the investigators on the basis of a pretest or earlier surveys.) The "budget pie" space must be divided up among these issues. Since the percents must sum to 100, a zero-sum constraint is imposed.

The "budget pie" concept offers both advantages and disadvantages. The most serious problem seems to be that a substantial portion of respondents cannot answer the question: this ranged from 4 percent in the Los Angeles study to 20 percent in the Indiana survey. (Current SRC question formats also produce "don't know" or no-response codes within this frequency range.) Another problem is that people may be led by the interview situation to make choices which they would avoid in real life, trusting (however erroneously) that their wishes might all be granted by the political genies whom they vote for. Or actual choices may not be transitive, and may not sum to 100. It should be worth determing, at least on an experimental basis, what proportion of the electorate is prone to these problems, and to adjust our "issue voting" models accordingly.

The major advantage of this approach, it seems to me, is that people must make explicit choices over a range of issues. The quantitative responses permit multidimensional scaling and sophisticated techniques borrowed from the econometric analysis of consumer choices. The question format also is realistic in the real world where we can't get everything we want in terms of budgets, issues, or candidates; in a stagnant or slowly growing economy, substantial new revenues are not likely, and the "fiscal dividend" from the progressive income tax has been greatly reduced by inflated prices for goods and services to which the government is already committed. Even politicians (such as California's Governor Brown) are starting to build campaigns on a "zero-sum" philosophy rather than the traditional "promise them anything".

Last but not least, the "budget pie" approach may tell us something substantive about taxes, a topic generally neglected by previous SRC surveys. The pie could also be used to permit respondents to allocate revenues among different types of taxes, income groups, or levels of government.

Several alternative approaches to the use of tax constraints on issue preferences have been developed. Some of the quarterly Surveys of Consumer Finances done by SRC, for example, asked respondents if they favored spending more on a list of issues ("soft" preference.") They were then asked if they would be willing to spend more on each issue even if that meant their taxes would be increased ("hard" preference.) Analysis of the difference between "hard" and "soft" preferences permits some inferences concerning issue salience and tradeoffs. Some recent Harris polls have asked people how much more taxes they would be willing to pay for certain policies; strong support for more spending on the environment was noted, but little support for welfare spending. Use of such questions on the SRC election studies would permit longitudinal analysis of issue preferences under different political and economic conditions.

In addition to policy positions, Congressional voting is an area where voters' explicit tradeoffs merit more attention on future SRC surveys. Much ink has been spilled debating the relative importance of parties and issues for Presidential voting. But neither of these factors seem to account for vote choices for Congress, where incumbency, Presidential popularity, and the state of the economy appear (at least in the aggregate) to influence voters' choices. The levels-of-analysis problem is considerable here, but one reason why macro and micro analyses of Congressional voting diverge is that some crucial questions have not been posed at the individual level. For example, what advantages do voters see in incumbency? What is the most important reason a respondent prefers a certain Congressional candidate? Asking the latter question in terms of party or issue position ("What do you like/dislike about the Republican or Democratic party/candidate?") may simply not be appropriate for

Congressional office, since so many Americans seem unaware of their Congressman's party affiliation or position on issues. The Conference might discuss alternative ways to approach voters' choice processes, perhaps through more open-ended questions or rank-ordering a set of reasons for casting a ballot or abstaining in midterm elections.

People's reasons for their behavior, of course, are not always believable. If we ask people if they vote for "the man or the party," as Gallup has so ingeniously done over the years, "the man" will win out every time by a huge majority, despite a generation of survey research results to the contrary. Carefully designed and pre-tested questions, however, should be attempted to help elucidate voters' choice processes, and to assess the validity of analytic spatial models of voters' issue positions.