

MEMO

TO: Participants in the Issue Voting and Rational Choice Conference
FROM: George Rabinowitz
RE: Some Suggestions for Future CPS Surveys

In general the CPS surveys have served as an excellent starting point for the analysis of issue voting. Nevertheless, there are several changes and additions to the survey which in my opinion would substantially assist investigation in this area.

1. Substance of questions. There is a natural tension in designing a survey between including questions concerning issues which are topical and salient at the time of an election and questions which tap more long range issue concerns. Clearly both types need to be included on the CPS Surveys. My principal concern is that too little attention has been given to designing questions which tap what are likely to be long term viable issues. This creates severe problems for investigators interested in over-time (historical) analysis, and perhaps more critical from the standpoint of this conference, this gap seriously hampers (a) investigation into mechanisms of selected perception and perceptual distortion, (b) critical examination of candidate strategies, and (c) the effect of real world events on political attitudes. Hence, it seems extremely desirable to develop a basic set of questions which span the major political issues and which have a high potential for remaining meaningful over time. The questions would desirably tap (a) attitudes towards blacks, (b) government involvement in the economy (health care, jobs, tax rate, guaranteed income), (c) government role in life style (child care, education, housing), (d) defense related questions (defense spending, military strength), (e) basic foreign policy (relations with the Soviet Union, Western Europe, Latin America, Africa, China, Japan, and the Middle East).

I realize that the inclusion of meaningful over-time questions has been a major concern of the CPS studies, but the problem is difficult and requires a more extensive examination than the past funding arrangements have permitted. Consideration of the nature and substance of this issue set should be one of the major concerns of this conference. Any assessment of issue voting can be no better than the particular issue questions which underlie that assessment.

2. Number of candidates located on 7 point issue scales. The 7 point issue items have proved useful. Questions in which we get both some notion of respondent position and their perceptions of candidate positions should continue on future studies. In terms of these questions, it would be most useful systematically to include more than the two major party nominees on a significant number of these issues. One of the factors which frustrate analysis in the U.S. context is that so much of our ability to draw insights from an election hinges on who the particular nominees are. From the standpoint of building up a solid theoretical base, far more could be accomplished if our analyses were based on a wider cast of characters. At the least this would allow us to see (a) if candidates who are perceived to be similar on a wide set of issues are evaluated alike, and (b) whether perceptual distortion phenomena differ markedly across candidates. Both questions are at the heart of any serious analysis of issue voting and are difficult to tackle with the data we now have available.

3. Issue salience. For some time I have been interested in the question of how the perceived salience of an issue affects the extent to which that issue comes into play in making political judgments. This concern is hardly unique to me; clearly, it is the center piece of the issue publics argument. In order to get at the effect of perceived salience in a rigorous fashion, it is necessary to have some measure of salience which meaningfully discriminates between issues. To this end a rank ordering of issues in terms of personal perceived salience would

be most useful. The more traditional salience question which asks individuals if they think an issue is very important - somewhat important -- or not important simply does not generate enough variance across issues to be useful. (Note: The CPS 1974 and 1976 surveys did include a ranking of issues in terms of perceived salience; however, the issues which were ranked were created to assess the media's role in agenda setting and did not correspond to the issue questions on which the respondents positioned themselves.)

4. Ambiguity. The idea that ambiguity plays an important part in candidate strategies is well known. Nevertheless, no attempt has been made to measure ambiguity or assess its impact. It would be nice to include some questions which try to get at this. For example, instead of asking an individual to position a candidate on the 7 point issue scale, you might allow him to assign enough points so that he is "pretty sure" he has included the candidate's actual position. A modification which would accomplish this could be worded as follows: "Many people are not sure exactly where they feel a candidate stands on an issue, but they do have some general idea of where he stands. If you feel like this, just tell me several different points for the candidate." Responses to this question could be coded either in terms of the upper and lower boundary of the responses or the mean and range of the points.

From a theoretical standpoint, it might prove useful to use this task description more generally and allow respondents to position themselves in this same way. Combined with the saliency ranking such information could be used to address a variety of questions about the relationships between perceived importance, clarity of perception, and positional certainty. If this type of format is used, it would be desirable to increase the number of alternatives on the issue scales from 7 to 9 or 11.

5. Candidate evaluation. I strongly support the inclusion of a set of questions

in which respondents rate a wide variety of political figures and groups. The thermometer questions dealing with various groups are already starting to form a useful historical time series. The candidate questions have stimulated the development of a new set of methodologies for the spatial analysis of elections which might prove useful in analyzing the structure and nature of political competition. In terms of the spatial methods it is especially important that care be given in selecting the list of candidates to be evaluated. Two guidelines should be applied. First, those candidates selected should be well known to the mass public; second, as far as possible, the candidates should represent a wide variety of political viewpoints. If both these conditions are satisfied, the set of candidates will provide a good basis for constructing a political space. If these conditions are not satisfied, politically meaningful spaces cannot be constructed.

6. Valence issues. The CPS surveys have done little (1976 is something of an exception) in systematically examining the relationship of valence issues to candidate choice behavior. So much has been written which emphasizes the importance of valence issues that this shortcoming should be eliminated in subsequent surveys. At a minimum, respondents should be asked to judge candidates and parties in terms of how well they will run the economy and how likely they are to perform well in the foreign policy area. An illustrative set of questions might be: "We are interested in what kind of job you think the different parties and candidates would do in handling certain kinds of problems over the next four years. First, what kind of job do you think _____ would do running the country's economy?" (If respondent is not clear about what economy means, prompt -- keeping people working, controlling the cost of living, things like that.) This could be followed by: "What kind of job do you think _____ would do in making foreign policy decisions?" (If not clear, prompt -- the kind of agreements the U.S. should make with other nations, if and when we should send troops to places,

things like that.) These questions could be recorded on a 7 point scale with the alternatives: excellent - very good - good - fair - poor - very poor - terrible.

7. Specific aspects of presidential character. Presidential character and its relevance for voting choice is another component in the rational voter model.

Osgood semantic differentials type questions seem a natural vehicle for quickly obtaining considerable information in this important area.

A list of useful endpoints are:

- a) honest - dishonest
- b) stable under pressure - unstable under pressure
- c) hard working - not hard working
- d) willing to compromise to get things done - unwilling to compromise to get things done
- e) smart - not smart
- f) has a clear vision of America's future - does not have a clear vision of America's future
- g) a nice person - not a nice person
- h) competent - not competent
- i) strong - weak

It might be useful to have respondents also rate a hypothetical ideal candidate on each of these scales.

8. Open ended questions. Survey research is susceptible to criticism concerning the shallow nature of both the interview situation and the close ended questions. One area which might prove useful as a discussion point in the conference is the use of more in depth interviews as a means for going beyond the standard short-answer format.

Another suggestion -- and something which seems quite reasonable to encourage -- is the publication of all the responses to the open ended questions which appear in the survey. Most researchers interested in seeing the political world "as the

voter sees it" are forced to rely on the CPS coding of the open ended questions. This is entirely inadequate for serious scholarship and might be one reason for the seemingly endless "issue debate." The publication should include the basic demographic information concerning the respondent and the respondent's interview number for easy cross reference to the rest of the survey. This publication should be distributed as an additional volume to the codebook.