

ISSUE VOTING, COGNITIVE PROCESSES, AND RATIONAL CHOICE

The debate over the level of ideology in the mass public has blossomed in the last ten years. From the certainty of the 1950's and 1960's that voters were non-ideological and unconstrained, we have reached a point in the 1970's where this model of voter has been seriously challenged. The Changing American Voter and "Belief Systems Revisited" strongly support the increase in constraint since the 50's. More recently Bishop, Oldendick, Tuchfarber and Bennett (1977) have questioned whether the changes in the last twenty years reflect real increases in constraint and ideological thinking, and argued that the new results are merely an artifact of the changes in SRC questions which have occurred since 1960. This debate points up a high degree of confusion as to what constraint really means, what it should imply, and how best it can be measured. Adding to the confusion is the fact that while constraint has increased, the level of political conceptualization, as defined in The American Voter has not. Almost exactly the same percentage of the population gave non-ideological responses (i. e. nature of the times or no issue content responses) in 1968 as did in 1956 (Converse, 1975).

In both Converse's "Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" and in Nie and Anderson's 1974 updating and response, there is an implicit and often explicit assumption that the authors are dealing with constraint. In examining the respondents' level of conceptualization Converse is looking at the degree to which candidate and party attitudes are constrained by an overarching, organizing concept, usually liberalism-conservatism. However, Converse admits that the use of open-ended questions puts a premium on articulateness, and he therefore moves to a consideration of how specific issues should relate to one another were there an overarching, organizing concept, albeit

unarticulated, underlying citizen attitudes. Converse suggests that the way to go about this is to correlate citizen positions on a particular issue (e. g. federal aid to education) with citizen positions on another issue (e. g. federal housing), and to see how high these correlations are. The logic runs that since "constraint and organization are very nearly the same thing" (Converse, 1964:228), then if we find that the mass public shows constraint among a range of attitudes, there might well be "an organization of more specific attitudes into wide-ranging belief systems" (Converse, 1964:229). Converse finds low levels of "constraint" between attitudes and rejects the idea that a high level of non-verbal conceptualization exists in the mass public. However, the impact of Converse's article goes far beyond its conclusions. The methodology and operationalization of constraint have remained fixed. Looking at Nie and Anderson or Nie, Verba and Petrocik, we find repetitions of Converse's approach. Partly because it is such a time consuming process, there has only been one attempt since 1956 to replicate findings on level of conceptualization, and this was for the 1968 election. The use of correlations across individuals, looking at the relationship between two variables at a time has been the dominant approach to constraint. Michigan election studies have consistently asked questions which make this correlational approach particularly accessible.

The dominance of correlational approaches, and the rarity of individual assessments of constraint are both unfortunate developments. While the Converse-Nie correlational approach tells us much about politics in the U. S., it does not tell us all that much about individual level constraint. What it measures is the overall consistency in the electorate as a whole towards a set of issues.

This is a key factor in electoral outcomes, in the degree of liberal-conservative voting, and possibly even in issue voting. Consistency, however, does not carry all the same connotations as constraint. Consistency looks at outcomes across individuals, at one point in time, without making any attempt to ascertain either the process of attitude formation, or the functional interdependence of the attitudes being examined. (This point is interesting since it is key to Converse's definition of belief system.) Most importantly, however, the Converse-Nie correlational approach does not allow us to characterize specific individuals according to how constrained or consistent each is.

Although an attempt to deal with all of these matters might seem too ambitious, I think that a move in that direction could be useful. I would suggest that election surveys should ascertain not only attitudes but values as well. By values I mean one of several organizing concepts in an individual's belief system in terms of which attitudes can be expressed. This conception of value is related to Converse's level of conceptualization. If we take for example Milton Rokeach's value inventory, we could hypothesize that particular values are likely to be intrinsic to liberalism or to another broad organizing political concept. In fact Rokeach finds that two values, freedom and equality differentiate between liberals, conservatives, fascists, and humanistic socialists.

However, in ascertaining respondents' values, we can also try to discover the degree to which the same values are relevant for an individual's attitudes on a wide range of issues. This might be done by having an individual indicate which values he or she feels are particularly helped or hindered by particular government policies, or

potential government policies, or even what values will be affected by any decision in a particular policy area. To the degree that the same values appear across a range of issues, we have an indication that the attitudes of a given individual might be functionally interrelated, i. e. constrained. We are now able to begin to characterize the individual without using the cumbersome levels of conceptualization coding. Such an approach as I am advocating would provide information concerning the degree to which a range of issues are commonly evaluated along the same value dimensions. For example, allowing a Communist to hold office might be evaluated along a national security dimension by a broad range of the population, while socialized medicine might be evaluated on an equality dimension. Only to the degree that an individual's attitudes are evaluated along the same dimension, can they be functionally related, and will that individual show constraint. A shift in the affect attached to freedom might affect the attitude towards socialized medicine, but not that towards Communists holding office. (The Converse-Nie correlational approach assumes that all attitudes should be related.) Values together with attitudes tell us how an individual's attitudes are related to one another. To give an example, the increase in consistency from the 1950's to the 1970's might very well be a function of candidates' taking more consistent positions as Nie et al (1976) argue. However, only to the degree that individuals cognize attitudes in relationship to the same values, can we expect these attitudes to remain highly related to one another, over time and different candidacies. Presenting respondents with a list of values and asking them to choose the three most relevant for a set of issues will give us

invaluable information.

However, the importance of values goes further and gets to the very core of the idea of ideological constraint. Thus far constraint has been viewed between issues, across individuals. However, there is no logical constraint between any two elements in a belief system. Supporting controls on natural gas only implies support for Carter if the person in question knows that Carter supports controls for natural gas. Logical constraint can not be ascertained through bivariate correlations.

There is a way in which we can measure the degree of logical constraint between belief system components, and do it on an individual level as well as on a population level. If a person favors freedom, and if he feels that Carter is advancing the goal of freedom, this should, all other things being equal, cause him to develop a favorable view of Carter. The relation between these three belief system elements is that of a logical syllogism (with the assumption that liking freedom implies liking people who like freedom). If we use values as criteria for evaluating political objects, then it should be a logical necessity that a person's attitude towards an object should be related to the affect he attaches to a value, multiplied by the perceived likelihood that a particular object will advance that value. (This last element is a belief.) This product could be summed over all relevant values (those the respondent has picked as most important in a given issue area). To put this in mathematical terms:

$$A_o = \sum_{i=1}^N b_{ov_i} v_i$$

where v_i is the affect attached to value i ; b_{ov_i} is the probability

that object o will advance value i ; and A_o is the respondent's attitude towards object o . This formula combines Fishbein's conception of attitude (Fishbein, 1963) with Rokeach's values. For any individual we could compute both sides of the equation for a range of attitude objects. Then we could, for each individual, regress the range of attitudes on the corresponding value-belief scores. This would give us measures of intrapersonal constraint for each of our respondents. Without using levels of conceptualization we could get a precise estimate of the logical consistency at the individual level. And even the use of level of conceptualization does not insure logical consistency for those rating high on it. Our measure would indicate the degree to which a change in a value or a belief would affect an attitude. While the Converse-Nie correlational approach gives us a static measure of consistency, one in which a change in one attitude does not logically imply a change in another attitude, using the relationship between values and beliefs, and attitudes does imply a continued over time and over change individual level stability.

In addition to measuring how constrained an individual's attitudes are, this approach would also allow an assessment of how consistent and constrained the entire sample is towards a particular object, by correlating attitude scores for a given object with value-belief scores for that same object. This could be particularly useful in indicating how volatile the public's attitudes are towards particular objects, i. e. what the slope of the regression line is.

Although the relationship between attitudes and values and beliefs may seem trivial, it does show great variance across individuals. In my dissertation research, I carried out a similar study among high school senior, and found that political interest and knowledge were

particularly important in discriminating between respondents with high levels of constraint, and those with low levels of constraint

In terms of the questions to be included in the questionnaire, my suggestions would require an attempt to ascertain the respondent's values, their relationship to and relevance for particular issue areas, and an assessment by the respondent of how much the policy, office-holder, etc., in question would enhance these values. By using the value inventory of Milton Rokeach, the respondent could be given a list of values, and asked to choose from among them for the three values that are most relevant for each issue or object being evaluated. Then each object or policy could be evaluated by the respondent. Alternatively the respondent could be asked about which attitudes are generally most important to him in political matters, and these three could be assumed to apply to all policies and objects. The respondent could then be asked to relate these same three objects to each attitude object under consideration. Initially, of course, the respondent would be asked to rate the full set of values affectively. Although the use of three values, rather than the entire set of eighteen might seem to be a problem, Fishbein and others, as well as my own research, show that using only the most salient values produces results almost equal to results using all eighteen values.

A second area of concern which could be approached through the biennial election studies is the problem of attitudes and non-attitudes. At present few questions are repeated between pre- and post-election waves. Instead four year panels are the main vehicle for studying attitude change; and here the non-attitude problem is only a peripheral concern. Converse, in postulating a black-white model of attitude change in relation to the public power issue was able to

separate out those respondents with true attitudes from those with "non-attitudes." But, as Converse indicates, (Converse, 1974), this model is only rarely a precise description of reality. Other researchers have also found little evidence of true attitude change in the population as a whole over time. However, unless we do feel confident in a black-white model, we cannot really identify which specific attitudes are stable for which specific individuals. A two year lag between questions makes the possibility of attitude change a real one, even if for the sample as a whole it appears random. A smaller time lag between questioning lessens the likelihood of attitude change, given the smaller number of stimuli to which the respondent is exposed between questioning. This also makes the black-white model a more accurate description. My interest here is in being able to separate out true attitudes (stayers) from more random responses (movers). This concern is related to the discussion of constraint above. Random responses cannot be expected to constrain one another, nor to constrain true attitudes.

There is an enormous difference between saying that attitudes do not constrain one another in a population, at a given time, and saying that stable attitudes do constrain stable attitudes, but that non-attitudes are widespread in our population. I found that in a two week panel, stable attitudes were constrained by values and beliefs to a much greater degree than were attitudes that had changed over a two week period. In a mass sample, the confirmation of this finding as well as an assessment as to the extent of stable attitudes over a wide range of issues should be useful. Even the Converse-Nie correlations might be usefully applied here. The increase in constraint reported by Nie et al might be a result of the existence

of more stable attitude in the 1970's rather than the result of greater constraint among stable attitudes. In any case the greater repetition of items between the pre- and post-election waves could be very useful in ascertaining the level of attitude holding and the relationship between "true" (stable) attitudes.

Both of my suggestions aim at trying to ascertain attitude holding and constraint on the individual level. A great deal of time and effort has been expended on characterizing the mass electorate as a whole, with very useful results. However, I think that this would be complemented by a renewed interest in individual level political ideology.