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Memo

To: Heinz Eulau, Board of Overseers, National Election Studies
From: Virginia Sapiro, Assistant Professor

Re: "Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes, and Rational Choice

I am very interested in attending the January conference at Stanford. My primary point in the following statement of interest is this: Political psychology hasn't gotten a fair shake in the National Election Studies.

These studies always include questions tapping perceptions, attitudes, and self-identification, as well as a few questions on personal competence and personal trust. The 1972 Election Study included a particularly wide range of psychological and social psychological measures (although many of these remained restricted until this year and thus have not facilitated contributions to the field), and the 1976 study included a few of the Rokeach instrumental and terminal values. However, these questions are inadequate in light of theoretical and empirical developments within the field of political psychology.

It is very common to hear the objection, "But psychological measures don't work." I would argue when psychological measures "don't work" it is chiefly because the measures that are included are limited in scope and untied to current issues and problems in the field. Moreover, it is unclear that we can declare psychological measures unworkable in political studies before more than a couple have been tried. Below is an outline of a few of the issues I would like to see addressed at the conference.

I. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDISPOSITIONS, ISSUES, AND DECISION PROCEDURES

Political scientists have tended to avoid the use of personality characteristics or predispositions on two justifiable grounds: (1) criticism of traditional trait analysis, often measured through administration of semantic differentials; and (2) the limited success achieved through use of these measures. I believe that the limited successes (or extensive failures) of the past do not warrant out of hand rejection of psychological dispositions in the future. Well thought out measures of personality characteristics and personal values may prove very useful in assessing the basic styles of and decision rules used in choice behavior. A number of areas in political and psychological research suggest connections between personality characteristics and political decision-making. Following are some examples.

A. One need not accept the developmental implications of cognitive development research to agree that there are different styles, habits, or propensities of policy-relevant thought. Merelman (1971) discusses four aspects of thought that have not been measured directly in large scale survey form: moral thought, causal thought, sociocentrism, and imaginative thinking. To this list we must add abstract thinking. Whether one sees the use of abstractions in political thinking as the economy of highly developed policy thinking (Converse, 1964) or finds this interpretation questionable (Lane, 1973), the way in which an individual categorizes or sorts out disparate pieces of information must have some effect on the way he/she perceives, understands, and seeks solutions to a political problem. Choice behavior with regard to any political issue is likely to vary depending upon the way one tends to respond to each of these dimensions of the political problem. These tendencies of "contemporary information processing" (Page/Sears memo, p.4) should be measured directly.

B. Both psychological and economic theories suggest other predispositions of importance to the process of choice and decision-making. Analysis of the structures, functions, and dynamics of belief systems remains central to the study of issue voting, but as Bennett (1977) points out, many of the most basic problems revealed in the belief systems controversies have not been worked out. Nevertheless, in the fifteen years of debate, no new types of measures have been added to the surveys that can assist in focussing on some of the key questions. To wit: (1) perhaps there is a better way to test for (a) the ability to use abstractions or "covering concepts" and (b) the tendency to use these (see comments above). (2) Rokeach has discussed "open" and "closed" belief systems. When does the ideologue in the Converse sense become an ideologue in the Mein Kampf sense? Possible keys to the answer -- measurement of dogmatism or authoritarianism -- seem to have been abandoned in survey research. Perhaps the authoritarianism questions of the 1950's surveys should be re-instated.

C. The Page/Sears memo asks us, "To what degree do citizens display a calculated, instrumental approach to voting? To what degree are they swayed by predictable cognitive biases?" One point we might consider is that a "calculated, instrumental approach" is a cognitive "bias" or style. Katz (1960) points out four motivational bases of attitudes, including adjustment (rational-utility function), ego defense, value expression (including reference-group identification), and knowledge (cognitive organization and consistency). Katz suggests the "arousal conditions" (the way in which these motivations might be called into use) and "change conditions" of each. The main point for consideration is this: Most people (as well as the situations in which they find themselves) are too complex to respond to issue alternatives always on the basis of the same or a single motivation. The question for us, then, should be rephrased: Under what conditions do citizens respond to issues in these different ways? What are the implications of differing motivations for (1) decision-making processes, (2) the choice that is made, and (3) the interrelationship of different choices (consistency and constraint)? Of course our major problem is whether we can measure these motivations. We might start with something as simple as adding some probe questions asking why people hold the attitudes they reveal in response to the standard issue questions.

B. Finally, we might look more closely at the types of analysis of predispositions that find currency in analysis of small groups and policy-making. The relevant psychological variables might include conformity, conflict avoidance, and response to risk and uncertainty. Can we translate some of the concerns of game theorists and experimental researchers into verbal problems? Risk and uncertainty is a good case in point. Game situations predetermine levels of risk and knowledge. The "real" game of politics is considerably different from laboratory game situations. Even the smart political scientist does not do a very good job of predicting outcomes of alternative choices. Moreover, if politics could be characterized as a situation where full knowledge is possible, we would not have to spend so much time, energy, and money studying it. How do citizens define risk and uncertainty for themselves? Under what circumstances? What are the effects of subjective senses of risk and uncertainty on choice behavior? (As you can see I don't think the risk behavior questions in the 1972 survey are the appropriate ones for this type of work.) One common finding in survey analysis falls within the domain of these questions but generally is not interpreted in this fashion. Uncertainty ("Politics is sometimes too complicated....") is related to the decision not to make a substantive choice (depressed levels of participation). Can we go further in applying and expanding the theories and results of prior studies in this area within the context of out-of-the-laboratory survey research? (For further questions along these lines, see Page, 1976).

II. MEANING, SYMBOLS, AND ISSUES

One of the most interesting developments in social science and history is increased attention to symbol and meaning (Graber, 1976; Edelman, 1977). However, we have done very little to measure directly the public's interpretation of key political terms and issues. Some examples:

A. Many people have attempted to find out what "representative" or "representation" means to political elites. But what do these terms mean to the citizen? The surveys ask whether citizens feel represented, but not what conditions would have to exist for them to feel represented.

B. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) conclude from their research that the public's understanding of the concept "big government" has changed; thus, the nature of consistency between attitudes toward "big government" and other issues has changed. Another example: has the public's interpretation of "government efforts to achieve integration" changed in the years since implementation of busing policies? It seems likely that concepts embedded in controversial issues are likely to undergo change in response to policy changes. As policies are invoked to deal with political problems, the context of the problem and thus, the issues and concepts involved, are changed. If we expect this type of change to occur, would we not do well to attempt direct measurement of meaning? Indeed, change in the meaning of political concepts and symbols is an interesting empirical question in and of itself.

C. Consider two issues and the different ways in which they might be related and satisfy a condition of consistency. Below is a table that displays four possible

positions on two issues: gun control and federal funding of abortions. For each combination justifications on grounds of consistency are offered. Some of the grounds may sound far-fetched to the reader. Some are surely more common than others. But are any of them intrinsically illogical? In order to gain further understanding of the problem of consistency we need more direct measures of the meaning of issues and alternatives.

How shall we measure meaning? I see three possibilities: (1) Probe questions after or on selected issues. Good examples include the probe on the is-one-of-the-parties-more-conservative question and the open ended busing question in the 1976 Election Study. (2) "Vocabulary tests." E.G. "People have different ideas about what [] means. We're interested in what you think....etc." (3) Projective or apperceptive techniques. For some types of meaning we may wish to explore the possibility of incorporating more projective techniques into the interview. For example, TAT type tests could be included within the usual array of "show cards." Each of these types of measures presents its own problems, of course. Open ended questions always present a problem of appropriate coding (even stickier when we're talking about understanding meaning). Projective techniques may prove prohibitively costly, if only insofar as training of interviewers and coders is concerned. But if we are to concentrate some attention on better understanding of meaning and symbolism of political issues and concepts we have to develop appropriate measurement techniques.

III. POTPOURRI

A. What happened to the measure of religious fundamentalism?

B. How quickly should issue questions be dropped after the problem has been "solved" or has dropped from public debate through other means? It strikes me that it would be useful to keep some issue items (e.g. 18 year old vote, pardon of Nixon, attitude toward war in Vietnam) somewhat longer than current practice. This would be of interest to those interested in (1) the effects of policy decisions on public beliefs and attitudes, (2) adult socialization, (3) belief and attitude change, and (4) processes of conflict resolution.

C. On demographics: What does "head of the household" mean? I understand the term when it refers to a single parent household, but who is the "head of the household" when there are two adults? When both are breadwinners? With increasing numbers of people interested in personal problems (most recent: Sniderman and Brody, 1977) and family roles and structures (gender role research) some more clear precoding of family demographics and roles would be helpful, especially: (1) Automatically coding the male in a two parent family as HOH is archaic and confusing when mixed in with single parent, female-headed households. (2) I strongly recommend pre-coding family membership as it was done in the 1971 Quality of Life Study, showing membership and life cycle information. (3) In addition, I would like to hear some discussion of possible inclusion of more of the measures of salience of and satisfaction derived from "private" roles and activities (viz. 1971 Quality of Life; 1972 Election Study). This would be helpful for people doing work on personal problems and needs and gender role studies (Sapiro, forthcoming).

D. One interesting new trend in psychological research is the study of altruism and helping behavior. This type of analysis is directly relevant to analysis of issue preference -- especially issues involving social welfare and re-distributive policies. Perhaps a measure of altruism?

E. Time is an essential but underutilized variable in political research.

(1) Does a Burkean "wisdom of our ancestors" approach to politics underlie some people's response to issues? (See 1950's measure of traditionalism.)

(2) Do people vary in the degree to which they are willing to accept present costs for future benefits? If so, this should affect policy choices. Consider further: A combination of "present cost-future benefit" measure with orientation toward risk-taking (see above).

F. On cost effectiveness: If there is any general agreement that more predispositional measures should be included, we need some careful discussion of the types of measures that can be drawn from prior psychological work. Specifically, many of the measures most appropriate to survey research are constructed from lengthy personality inventories or lists (e.g. MMPI, Bem Sex-Role Inventory, Rokeach Values). Full use of any of these measures would consume a large amount of interview time and thus, may be inappropriate. Use of abbreviated versions may reduce the utility of the measure beyond repair. A good example of the latter point is the severely limited number of Rokeach values included in the 1976 Election study. Should these types of measures be included at all?

IV. CONCLUSION

I hope some of these comments and suggestions are of interest to the Board of Overseers and this conference. I have attempted to draw suggestions from recent developments in psychological and political work, as well as from some of the major "unsolved problems" in issue voting research. In addition I have attempted to focus on the areas of issue voting problems in which the traditions of psychological and economic models and theories might inform each other most fruitfully.

One final comment: I was very pleased to see the announcement of this series of conferences. In addition, I think series of open workshops (perhaps at APSA meetings) on selected topics in use and analysis of the Election Studies could be sponsored by the Board.

The Table

FEDERAL FUNDING FOR ABORTION	GUN CONTROL	
	FOR	AGAINST
FOR	<p>"Liberal positions"</p> <p>Concern for life (guns help people kill; concern for mother's life)</p> <p>Crime control (guns help people kill; unwanted, uncared for children are juvenile delinquents)</p>	<p>Freedom of individual expression and choice (right to have a gun; woman's control over her body)</p> <p>Economy (gun control a needless expense; AFDC payments more expensive than abortions)</p> <p>Concern for life (self-protection; concern for mother's life)</p> <p>Crime control (gun control will not stop criminals from having guns; unwanted, uncared for children are juvenile delinquents)</p>
AGAINST	<p>Concern for life (guns help people kill; "right to life")</p> <p>Crime control (guns help people commit crimes; abortion is murder)</p>	<p>"Conservative" positions</p> <p>Freedom of individual expression and choice (right to have a gun; "right to life")</p> <p>Economy (gun control a needless expense; the public should not have to pay for abortions)</p> <p>Concern for life (self-protection; "right to life")</p> <p>Crime control (gun control will not stop criminals from having guns; abortion is murder)</p>

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