

RESPONSE MEMORANDUM FOR
CONFERENCE ON ISSUE VOTING, COGNITIVE PROCESSES
AND RATIONAL CHOICE

As the authors of the memo point out, issue voting has long been an important concern of political scientists interested in democratic theory. The reason for this is clear: the question: "How do citizens articulate their political interests in their political attitudes and behavior?" (the general question which underlies the one typically asked, "Do citizens vote their issue positions?") addresses the central assumption of theories of democratic citizenship. As that assumption is phrased (cf. Thompson, Democratic Citizen, chs. 1 & 2), it applies a relatively simple "translation mechanism" to all issues equally. That is, citizens are expected to vary along a continuum of how much (or how skillfully) they take issues into account in voting, and how coherently they tie together their positions on a number of issues. Much research has, consequently, concentrated on characteristics of citizens which generalize across issues (education, interest, strength of party identification, articulateness, information level, etc.), and some has examined characteristics of issues which generalize across individuals (valence/position issues; issue-candidate linkages, e.g., the competence issue in 1972; issue-party linkages, e.g., the difference between the social issue and traditional economic issues in the 1960's). Moreover, interaction effects have been taken into account: some issues are more important to some people than other issues (or than they are to other people). "Issue publics" are an established part of descriptions of the American political universe,

and some studies have been made of more complex weighting and combinatorial formulae (RePass; Fishbein). Finally, studies of issue voting have gone far toward enumerating the requisite evidence for showing the occurrence of issue voting (Brody & Page).

The progress in examining this fundamental assumption of democratic theory has been made by taking as given the focus on the extent to which citizens vote their issue positions. This approach is appropriate only if two conditions are met: (1) if the process through which objective conditions and events are perceived as political interests, translated into preferences and thence into votes, is relatively well-understood; and (2) if that process is the same across all issues. In fact, of course, we know little about these two conditions.

The most productive way in which to get beneath the surface similarity of public issues is to pick one issue area and to devote enough resources to its investigation that we can trace the path from objective event or condition, to perception and cognition, and finally to political action on the basis of this cognition. A research strategy like this changes the focus from whether citizens vote their issue preferences to ask how people process information of potential political relevance into political preferences and then act on those preferences. It explicitly trades breadth (across issues) for depth (hopefully, of insight into politically relevant cognitive processes).

The issue of political responses to economic conditions has several features which recommend it as an arena for further study of information processing at the individual level. First, the

objective conditions to which individuals are subject can be specified with some precision, both in terms of impacts on personal financial well-being and in terms of contextual (e.g., community or regional) effects. Second, data about subjective impressions of economic well-being have been collected for some time by ISR and other agencies, and the methodology is fairly well-developed. Third, theory is well-articulated at both middle and micro levels and hypotheses can be generated on a substantial foundation of previous research by economists and sociologists. Finally, recent empirical work by political scientists at both the aggregate and individual levels on the political effects of economic conditions, and on the political outcomes of personal problems, show promise for this line of inquiry.

To specify the cognitive processes which map the path from economic conditions to political choice, two sets of questions must be investigated. The first relates to the perception of economic conditions by individuals, particularly the link between objective conditions and subjective impressions. The second relates to the patterns of social comparison by which individuals evaluate their own conditions (or opinions about them) and begin to assess the political implications of those conditions. (Festinger, p. 123). Some progress has been made in analysing empirical questions concerning both the perception of economic conditions and the attribution of praise or blame for these events. In the paragraphs below, each of these ^{categories} will be discussed, and the impact of past research and need for new data collection specified.

Much of the work on the political impact of economic conditions has been based either solely on objective data (e.g., aggregate

figures on per capita income or unemployment over time: cf. Kramer, Arcelus, Tufte) or solely on subjective reports (e.g., of personal financial condition: cf. Campbell, et al., ch 14). In contrast, one recent study utilized data from the American panel survey of the late 1950's to derive measures of correspondence between income reports taken at several points and subjective assessments of change in personal financial condition over the same period (Weatherford). As Rainwater points out, income is a particularly good indicator of economic well-being because it is a necessary condition for nearly all consumption-based status differences, and because there is widespread agreement on the "social meanings" of different income levels. Nevertheless, the political relevance of economic conditions extends beyond movements of family income, and the impact of other factors must be tested. These might include unemployment, both of the individual and of those in his immediate circle of friends and work-mates (Verba and Schlozman), as well as general economic conditions in the community or region. (This is especially important as national cycles have effects that vary across sectors or regions: cf. Vernes; et al.; Vaughn.)

Data on financial or economic conditions outside the respondent's family usually have not been collected by SRC/CPS. However, aggregate indexes for states and larger communities are available from DoL: these could be collected for PSU's and added to the data file. Subject^{ive} impressions of economic conditions in the community or the region could be gathered with perhaps one or two additional questions.

The other question is one of social comparison. In seeking politically-relevant meanings for economic impacts, the individual

will compare his condition to that of others. Moreover, it may be the case that the reference group relevant to interpreting the personal impact of economic conditions is different from the one which anchors the political action which follows from that impact. Nevertheless, the pattern of social comparison on economic impacts will dominate the emergence of natural groupings of those with similar interests, on which party coalitions can be based. The question then is: What groups are demarcated by the pattern of social comparison on issues of economic impacts?

This question is an essentially empirical one, but it is hardly lacking in theoretical guidance. The most familiar set of hypotheses about the lines of social comparison on economic issues are theories of the political effects of class cleavages. Theories of class and politics are dynamic theories in proposing that it is along class lines that opinion on the impact of economic conditions will break. Theorists following directly in the tradition of Marx generally hold to this line, finding class unity (actual or emergent) on both sides of the middle class/working class line (Anderson; Hamilton). Empirical work by Hibbs, moreover, shows that the break along class lines is objectively rational in the United States because the two parties produce policies differing in terms of the mix of inflation and unemployment. Others, notably Weber, propose that the emergence of self-conscious classes might be inhibited by considerations of status and prestige (cf. Giddens). This implies that, while members of the one class may consider economic impacts in light of their class affiliation, those in the other may conceptualize the issue more in terms of sub-class "prestige" or status groupings. Ossowski, for instance, suggests that individuals in the working

class will be class-oriented, while individuals in the middle class will be status-oriented.

This difference in orientation can be conceptualized in terms of social comparison or reference group processes. While the reference group approach spawned a number of important experimental and small-scale naturalistic studies during the 1950's and 60's; its application to larger social and political questions has faltered, apparently because of problems of operationalization. More recently, however, interest in the reference group approach has risen and scholars from a number of disciplines have applied the theory to phenomena associated with class and economic conditions (Laumann; Veneris; Weatherford; Wright; Vannemann; cf. Eułau). While these findings go some way toward mapping the patterns of social comparison on economic issues, they are not conclusive: they cover relatively short, discrete time periods, and the data on which they are based do not tap the universe of content in the original conceptualization.

The problems of operationalization are not trivial: survey researchers do not yet have a well-developed method for getting at reference groups. The problem can be approached indirectly. Data requisites for this approach include: cross-sectional indexes of social ranking, both objective and subjective (occupation, education, income, class identification), as well as measures of strength of identification with both class and stratum (Kluegel; Brown, et al.). Most of these are or have been part of CPS surveys.

These data suffer from their indirectness, however, and must be supplemented with a set of items more difficult to formulate: those designed to tap the politically-relevant sense of social

distance which dominates the emergence of status and class consciousness. Laumann's work on stratification and social distance is the closest to the reference group approach, but it will require considerable adaptation. Laumann attempts to tap social distance judgements by asking about preferences for informal social contacts. Along somewhat similar lines, I have constructed the following set of items to simulate the conditions under which politically relevant social comparisons are made on the issue of economic conditions. They should be seen as working proposals and will hopefully stimulate further thought or experimentation.

1. Around election time, we often hear about people "voting their pocketbooks." This means that some people will vote for the party in office because their own financial situation has been good; while other people, whose financial situation is bad, will be angry about the economy and vote against the incumbent party. Of course, for many people other issues are more important than the economy, and they'll be voting for other reasons.

How about you? Will you be voting your pocketbook this year, or are other issues more important when you think about the election?

And how about people like you? Will people like you be voting their pocketbooks this year?

The next question attempts to provide a reference and a metric by which the individual can demarcate "relevantly similar others."

2. We've been talking about how you and people like you feel about economic conditions. We're interested in getting a picture of what folks are thinking about when they mention "people like me."

Here is a list, going from small incomes to larger ones, of the average family incomes for different categories of people last year. Put the number closest to your family's income in the middle of this line. Now put the highest income somebody could have and still be among the "people like you" these questions have mentioned. And what is the lowest income a family could have and still be "people like you"?

whose levels of conceptualization are clearly below group benefits, and the predominant response was that the questions were interesting and novel. (One respondent, however, also insisted that he had never thought about whether he was a "leaning independent.") These or similar questions might be systematically pilot-tested, at least, for the return in terms of theory and hypothesis-generation would be great from the ability to adapt social comparison theory to the description of politically-relevant cognitive processes.

Finally, one or two items could be used to identify preferences for macro-economic policy alternatives. In general, popular images of the parties reflect their different positions on the Phillips Curve trading off inflation against unemployment, with the Democrats seen as the "party of prosperity" and the Republicans as the "party of recession." These items attempt to tap those images in terms of policy trade-offs.

4. Which of these two problems--inflation or unemployment--do you think will have the most serious consequences for the country during the next year or so?

5. No one likes inflation or unemployment, but sometimes it is impossible to have both stable prices and full employment. If the government had to choose between two policies--one combining lower inflation with higher unemployment, versus one combining higher inflation with lower unemployment--which policy would you rather have the government pick?

The former question is familiar from previous studies; I have used the latter successfully with a recent survey of Los Angeles voters.

This memo opened by reiterating the central place of interests both in democratic theory and in the study of issue voting. The agenda proposed here addresses the question of how interests are derived from individuals' perceptions of economic conditions and events,

focusing especially on (a) the match between objective situations and subjective impressions, and (b) the use of social comparison by individuals both to define conditions and to organize responses to them. The suggestions build on previous work by SRC/CPS and they promise to deepen our knowledge of the cognitive processes involved in translating social and economic events into politically meaningful responses.

M. Stephen Weatherford
University of California,
Los Angeles