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To: Board of Overseers, National Election Study/ CPS

From: M. Margaret Conway

Re: Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes, and Rational Choice

Introduction

The issue related questions included in past CPS American Election Studies do not facilitate adequate assessment of the role of issues in voter decisions. Past CPS surveys have also not been structured so as to maximize the analysis of the structure of political belief systems and their impact on political behavior. Lastly, advocates of rational choice theories of electoral behavior could justifiably claim that it is not possible to evaluate the relative utility of rational choice and attitudinal theories of electoral choice using CPS data sets.

Discussion of the role of issues and evaluation of cognitive processes in electoral behavior has been complicated by the failure to distinguish between several conceptually distinct phenomena. These are political belief systems, value preferences, public policy preferences, perceived party, candidate, and respondent issue positions, and issues in political campaigns. Development of appropriate theories and their evaluation requires conceptual clarity and adequate measurement of each of these.

Measurement of Salient Issues

The role of issues in voter choice can be assessed correctly only if voters are provided with an opportunity to express freely their issue

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concerns. The measures included in the 1976, 1974, and earlier CPS American election studies do not obtain adequate issue measures, regardless of whether one attempts to use the fixed alternative agree-disagree questions, comments coded from candidate like and dislike assessments by the voters, the most important national problem questions, or the seven point issue proximity scales. The problems in measuring issue preferences presented by the agree-disagree questions have been considered elsewhere and will not be discussed here. (See Kessel, 1972; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, forthcoming; Margolis, 1977)

It is unlikely that either the most important problem or the candidate like and dislike questions will elicit valid campaign issue and policy preference responses. Responses can regard something as a very important national problem but that problem may not become a campaign issue which enters into their voting decision. The problem may be one on which politicians and voters agree, e.g., no one is in favor of crime. Secondly, something may be seen as an important national problem, such as high unemployment, yet it does not personally touch the voter or his or her family and does not appear likely to do so, and the lack of personal salience results in the problem not being an issue to the voter. Candidate like/dislike questions are also not likely to obtain issue responses; by their nature they draw forth party related or candidate personal qualities and experiences responses. (This is true of congressional as well as of presidential election choices.)

The limitations of the issue proximity questions as currently used in the CPS questionnaire must also be acknowledged. The issue proximity questions do permit measurement of the voters' perceived relative distance from candidates and parties with reference to the specified issues. However, the issue proximity questions do not permit adequate measurement of issue salience. Miller and Miller (1977) have argued that the phrase "or have you not thought much about that" which

occurs at the end of the issue proximity questions is a measure of issue salience. It is not a measure of issue salience, but instead is a measure of awareness of the issue.

The model of issue impact on electoral choice usually presented in the literature asserts that for an issue to be important to a voter in vote choice decisions, the voter must be aware of the issue, the issue must be salient to the voter, the voter must perceive candidate and/or party differences on the issue, and the voter must believe that government action can have some effect in resolving the issue. Questions must be asked which make possible assessment of the extent to which all four conditions are present.

Since researchers can legitimately be interested in the issue proximities and other characteristics of a set of issues other than those with which the voter is most concerned, continuation of the practice of asking the voter to indicate perceived issue positions of self, candidates and parties is appropriate, provided that adequate measures of related factors, such as saliency and perceived government policy, are asked. However, the true impact of issues on voter choice cannot be adequately assessed until the voter is given an opportunity to state the issues with which he or she is concerned, indicate the relative distance which the voter perceives between his or her own preferences on those issues, and the perceived issue positions of the candidates and parties, and indicate whether the relevant level of government is perceived as being capable of affecting conditions relative to these issues.

Evaluation of the role of issues in voting requires measurement of the change over time in voter issue positions and voter assessments of candidate issue positions. Measurement of issue positions should therefore begin much earlier in the campaign, preferably before the first primaries.

The Assessment of Political Belief Systems

Political belief systems, are conceptually distinct from policy preferences or campaign issue stands and would be better evaluated if they were measured in a systematic fashion using a method designed explicitly for the evaluation of belief systems. Underlying the method discussed here is the assumption that both the content and structure of political belief systems merit our attention. Furthermore, we need to assess at least three elements of belief system structure. These are (1) dimensionality: the number of dimensions which characterize an individual's political belief system; (2) the degree of articulation present in each of the dimensions; (3) the extent to which belief systems are hierarchically organized. Logically, various numbers of dimensions will be present in the belief systems of different individuals, although patterns and explanations for these patterns can undoubtedly be developed. Some individuals may make very refined judgements using different dimensions in relation to political objects, while for others the articulation of some or all political belief system dimensions would be quite limited. Finally some individuals may have a very complex hierarchically structure to their political belief systems, while others do not. Converse (1964) implied a one dimensional structure reflects political sophistication in a political belief system, while Lane (1973) implies the contrary, with political sophisticates have a multi-dimensional political belief system.

Unfortunately, both conceptual and measurement problems have limited assessment of political belief systems. As a preliminary suggestion, a method developed for personality assessment in psychology will be described; experimental studies would be necessary to assess its utility to measure political belief systems, but it merits consideration.

A cognitive system or belief system could be labelled complex in structure if it contains a relatively large number of highly articulated constructs which are integrated hierarchically in a relatively extensive pattern of interrelationships. As this definition implies, the study of political belief systems should then focus on the relative number of constructs in a cognitive system--the degree of cognitive differentiation--and the relative degree of hierarchical organization--the integration--of the cognitive system. Analysis of the dimensions of cognitive structure can also focus on the types of constructs used in construing political objects and the degree of discrimination or articulation within each dimension or construct used. A more cognitively complex person would both be expected to use more dimensions in construing political elements and to make more refined judgments, using more distinct categories, in applying a particular construct to political objects. The hierarchical organization of cognitive systems can also be evaluated in terms of the degree of concreteness and abstractness present. Harvey (1965) further refines this into consideration of the clarity-ambiguity, compartmentalization-integration, and centrality-peripherality of cognitive systems.

In the Role Construct Repertory Test (Rep Test) devised by George Kelly (1955) to evaluate constructs used in assessing occupants of particular roles, the individual is provided with a varied set of different roles and asked to assign names to the roles. Then the individual is either asked to select three roles or assigned three roles and requested to indicate some important way in which two of them are similar and one is different. In this Minimum Context Form of the "Rep" Test, the process is repeated, using different combinations of roles, either for all role combinations or for a set number of combinations. Other forms of the Rep Test have also been developed.

The roles presented to the subjects and the constructs elicited from them can be organized and presented in the form of a grid. This grid method for use in evaluating cognitive structure through assessing the nature of personal constructs used and their structure is essentially a sorting technique, which provides a matrix which can be analyzed using a variety of statistical techniques. This grid form can be adapted for use in large scale research projects examining the nature of political belief systems. In a generalization of the grid method, the elements placed in the columns may be political leaders, roles, institutions, events, issues, or policies, and the constructs are placed in the rows of the matrix. As originally developed by Kelly, scoring is binary, with a zero assigned to each cell of the matrix where the emergent pole of the construct is not used in construing a role and a one assigned when the emergent pole is used. (In Kelly's terminology, an emergent pole is the one which encompasses the greater proportion of the perceived context of the construct.)

Other scoring systems are often used: these include ranking of all elements from one to n, with one assigned to the element which has more of the emergent characteristic of the construct and n assigned to the element which has the least.

Probably more useful in political science is a seven point rating scale, with a +3 being assigned to elements construed maximally with one pole of a construct, 0 as a neutral point, and a -3 representing maximum quality of the other pole of the construct. To illustrate, if political leaders were being evaluated using a construct grid, constructs such as honest-dishonest, wise-foolish, smart-stupid, friendly to labor-unfriendly to labor, keeps his election commitments-does not keep his election commitments might be used by individuals. For example, using the construct honest-dishonest, a +3 might be assigned to Gerald Ford and a -3 to Richard Nixon by an individual.

By requesting the persons being surveyed to supply the constructs by which the political objects are being evaluated, the beliefs important to them in assessing these political objects are being tapped. Such a method has obvious advantages over the like-dislike dichotomy used in the election studies to assess parties, issues, and candidates, or in public opinion studies to obtain evaluations of issues, candidates, political leaders, and political parties. The problem with the grid method of obtaining individuals' constructs, of course, is that the less articulate may not respond to such a request in a manner which permits adequate assessment of their political belief systems.

Experimental studies, using the comparative method of the Rep Test, could be used to obtain a set of constructs. For example, persons could be asked to indicate among a set of three issues two which are similar in some important way and to indicate how those two differ from the third issue. The process could be repeated a number of times per individual for different combinations of several issues to obtain the dimensions through which the individual evaluates policy issues. Repeating the process over a representative sample of citizens would provide a set of constructs to be used in creating a policy issues construct instrument which could be used in survey research.

Thus, the alternative is to supply a set of constructs found through preliminary research to be appropriate for construing the type of political

element of interest in the research. Since individuals assign some degree of shared meaning to words, a basis for comparison exists. One assumes, of course, that the supplied constructs represent the most significant dimensions of the individuals' belief systems. One might argue that this is contrary to the individuality corollary, which asserts that individuals differ in their construction of objects. (Crockett, 1965) However, the use of a ranking system of scoring constructs permits assessment of degree of difference in using the specified constructs to evaluate political objects, and the scoring system permits indicating that an object is not viewed in terms of a particular construct.

Use of the grid construct ranking method would permit assessment of the extent to which different policies are evaluated in terms of the same constructs; one would expect more cognitive complex person to use more different constructs and to assign different scores of a particular construct to different policies. On the other hand, one would expect a cognitively less complex person to use fewer constructs and to be more likely to apply fewer rankings of a construct to different policy issue. Use of a grid measurement method would also permit far more refined assessment of the nature of beliefs used in evaluating political leaders than the simple thermometer scale now used in the Center for Political Studies election studies. (Bennett, 1975; Conway, 1977)

One alternative to the use of the grid method of evaluating cognitive structure which has been used in political belief system research is the

Individual Difference Scaling technique (INDSCAL) developed by Carroll and Chang (1970). INDECAL is a multi-dimensional scaling technique which evaluates the dimensions underlying paired comparison judgments. INDSCAL does make possible evaluation of individual cognitive structure, weighing the dimensions for each individual in the sample on the basis of the variance explained, but the dimensions used are those derived from analysis of the total sample. INDSCAL can thus identify both the cognitive dimensions common to a group and the variations among individuals within the group on those dimensions. This technique has been limited use in research relevant to questions of interest in political science (Wish, Deutsch, and Biener, 1970; Marcus, Tabb, and Sullivan, 1974; Jackson and Marcus, 1975)

In comparison to the grid method, certain limitations are evident. INDSCAL is cumbersome to use, requiring paired comparison judgments between all possible pairs of the stimuli presented; for example, in the study by Jackson and Marcus, 15 stimuli were used, requiring 105 paired comparisons. In that study, subjects were asked to evaluate both the similarity of the two stimuli and the one the subject preferred. The large amount of data generated from this technique and the limits placed by existing computer software and generally available hardware have resulted in INDSCAL use being feasible only with small samples. In using INDSCAL, the stimuli are presented to the subject by the researcher. In contrast, in the grid method, the constructs may be either those suggested by the subject or those presented to the subjects by the investigator.

Retrospective and Prospective Judgements, Contextual Variables, and Vote Choice

One aspect of issue related voting which needs more attention is the effect of retrospective or prospective judgements on voter choice. Again, conceptual and methodological problems may have impeded the analysis of the effects of these variables. An examination of longitudinal research which employs such variables as changing economic conditions (measured by either changes in absolute levels or in rates of change in such variables as unemployment, inflation, or per capita income) indicates that a number of studies find these variables have considerable explanatory power in accounting for aggregate electoral outcomes, such as the percentage of congressional seats won or the proportion of the total vote won. (Conway and Wyckoff, 1977b) However, these aggregate data studies focus on explaining residual variance after removing the long term party vote effect. In contrast, research employing economic conditions or government performance assessment variables in survey data based analyses of individual vote choice in congressional elections find no or only weak effects of these variables on vote choice (Conway and Wyckoff, 1977a; Conway and Wyckoff, 1977b) However, Miller and Miller (1977) report weak or moderate effects of an economic performance assessment variable on candidate evaluations in the 1976 presidential race.

The questions employed may be too vague to tap adequately the direct effects of economic conditions and general evaluations of government management of the economy and of other areas of public policy on individual vote choice. The words used may not get the same response pattern as would more specific language such as the "cost of living

Have evaluations been made of the response patterns to alternative question wordings? Furthermore, vote choice may be influenced substantially by contextual effects. For example, a voter might not personally be worse off financially than a year ago, but rising unemployment in the voter's place of residence or the industry in which he or she is employed might outweigh the voter's relative personal current financial condition in influencing vote choice. However, adequate measures of these contextual variables (as perceived by the voter) are not included in the CPS survey instruments.

Footnote

The key component which channels behavior in Kelly's Personal Construct Theory is the construct; a construct is a way of viewing persons, objects, or events such that some things are seen as similar in some fashion yet different from other persons, objects, or events. The contrast must be relevant, with a limited range of applicability. Thus, objects may be compared on a number of relevant, non-global dimensions. A construct is not a class of objects or an abstraction of a class, but a bi-polar scale or reference axis.

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