

Chapel Hill, N.C.
November 26, 1977

Professor Benjamin Page
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RE: Application for participation
in the NES Seminar on Issues,
Voting Behavior, and Informa-
tion Processing

Dear Ben:

Thanks for your phone call in response to my request for information regarding participation in the NES seminar on "Issues, Voting Behavior, and Information Processing" to be held at Stanford University in early 1978. You will recall that your call to my office at the University of Maine did not reach me directly, as I have been visiting a friend in Chapel Hill over the Thanksgiving holiday. However, one of my associates at Maine reached me here just this morning to convey what I gather was the most urgent part of your message: apply for the seminar at once--today, if possible.

I do not know precisely what form such an application should take; nor do I have available here the professional materials or the time that I would utilize if I were composing such an application in my office at the University of Maine. So, begging your indulgence for the informal--and, perhaps, the inappropriate--format of this communication, let me "apply" for an invitation to the Seminar by discussing, at modest length, two topics which I would urge be included in a broader agenda of the Seminar. The first of these topics deals with the problem of the diversity and the number of research goals that might be pursued through national election studies. The second topic may add to that "problem": I propose that future NES interview schedules include a new set of measures of citizens' preferences for the relative size and the allocation of the federal budget. These measures, I suggest, would be useful additions to those already developed to pursue some theoretical interests and would be far superior to existing measures employed in several such undertakings.

My suggestions are informed, in a general sort of way, by a decade and one-half of reading in the fields of public opinion--public policy linkages and American voting behavior and, more particularly, by the research undertakings with which I have been associated as Director of the Comparative State Elections Project (1968-72); Co-Principal Investigator, 1972 CPS American National Election Study; and Co-Principal Investigator, Pilot Study of Public Opinion on National Priorities (1972-74).

I. Political Theory, NES Goals, and the Selection of
"Issue"-oriented Measures for NES Survey Instruments

The "issue" variables included in the University of Michigan election study surveys have been used by primary and/or secondary investigators for a wide variety of purposes. Among these purposes are the following: (1) Measuring citizens' levels of conceptualization, (2) information regarding public policy, and (3) ideological consistency (issue "constraint"); (4) estimating the impact of specific issues on voters' candidate choices

in--and (5) on the outcomes of--elections; (6) testing models of "rationality" of citizens' party identifications, (7) ideological identifications, and (8) candidate choices--and of (9) parties' and candidates' electoral strategies; (10) measuring the impact of public opinion on national public policy and (11) testing alternative theories of the linkages between mass opinions and public policies; and (12) determining the distribution of policy positions and (13) the degree of cleavage and consensus among the citizenry and among and within subsets of that population. Moreover, individual issue questions have been utilized for analysis at one point in time, for panel studies, and for the production of longitudinal, time-series data.

There is no question but that many of the election study schedule items utilized for many of the above-listed purposes were not designed for those purposes and cannot be said to be particularly appropriate for those purposes. And it is probably fair to conclude that it is difficult--perhaps logically impossible--to design a set of issue items which can adequately serve all of those purposes simultaneously. That is, there would appear to be inherent conflicts between and among some of the uses of issue items, for example:

(a) Items ~~are~~ chosen for their extreme salience in the candidate choices of some voters may be irrelevant to the choices of other voters. Indeed, the greater the "policy pluralism" of the electorate (the larger the number of distinct groups each with its idiosyncratic policy concerns), the larger will be the number of specific policy items the analyst may wish to include in the interview schedule (while the weaker it is likely that the relationship will be between responses to any one issue item and, e.g., candidate choice).

(b) Items chosen for their salience among voters may not be those on which the parties/candidates choose to differentiate themselves (or are differentiated by the media, election analysts, and/or the electorate).

(c) Issue dimensions (or the wording of specific issue items) repeated from one election study to the next in order to acquire time-series data may not be those ~~are~~ which are of particular relevance to the electorate with respect to candidate choice or some other dependent behavior, attitude, or attitude structure.

(d) The issue dimensions most salient in electoral choices may have ^{no} relationship to the issues of public policy and to public policy decisions between elections.

(e) The nature of the public policy alternatives presented by the candidates and/or interview-schedule designers may bear little resemblance to the alternatives considered by policy makers

Given that there are financial and methodological constraints on the number of issue items that can be included in NES interview schedules, I would hope that the Seminar participants would be encouraged to discuss, at some length, the following questions: (1) What is the degree of inco_m

patatability among the issue-data demands of alternative analytic purposes and, within any one purpose, of alternative theories? (2) What are the participants' priorities among the alternative analytic uses of NES issue data? (3) To what extent are the issue data needs of top-priority uses compatible with one another? (4) What procedures should be used, by those actually designing the NES interview schedules, to select the specific issue dimensions and question formats to be included in those schedules?

I would also hope that the results of these discussions might be conveyed to the NES Board of Overseers--and might be given due consideration in the Board's policy decisions.

II. Proposed: A New Set of Issue Measures

The selection of items (issue-related or otherwise) for inclusion in NES interview schedules is an inherently "conservative" process. There are strong pressures for the continuation of time series on specific items. There are good reasons for retaining particular types of items thought to be necessary for the continuation of previously developed theoretical interests. And there are always severe restraints on the total number of items that can be included. In such a "zero-sum" situation there is little support for specific new items designed to pursue existing theoretical interests in a more satisfactory way--much less for new items designed to open new theoretical perspectives. Every proposed item becomes a competitor of every other item, and new items are seen as a threat to the continuation of items by those who have found the old items to be at all useful.

In such an environment it may be futile to suggest that the Seminar group consider recommending a new set of issue-related items for inclusion in NES interview schedules. But that is what I propose.

The set of measures I propose is designed to measure citizens' preferences for the relative size and the allocation, across 12 to 15 ~~subcategories~~ "policy" or "spending" categories, of the federal budget.

The general concept underlying the measures is as straight-forward as it is appealing: How much does the citizen want the federal government to tax and spend for each of its general "functions"--relative to the amount currently being spent for each of those purposes?

The measures are equally straight-forward at the general operational level:

The citizen (survey respondent) is informed as to how the current federal budget is being allocated across n spending categories (e.g., defense, education, agriculture, highways). The allocation units are percentages of the total federal budget, each worth k billion dollars or, more manageably, one cent of each dollar spent by the federal government. The citizen is then offered the opportunity to reallocate the 100 units across the n categories according to how he/she "would most like to see it spent." The citizen is also offered ~~the~~ additional opportunities: (1) to add additional spending units (above the 100 representing the status quo) to whatever categories he/she prefers--with the understanding that for each such additional unit "spent," his/her taxes (and everyone

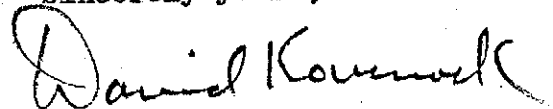
else's taxes) would be increased by one percent, and (2) to reduce the total number of spending units below 100 by cutting spending in as many categories as desired--with the understanding that the relevant programs/services, and taxes, would be correspondingly reduced. (The citizen may turn down any--or all three--opportunities.) The citizen-respondent's ultimate allocation to each of the spending categories is then recorded by the interviewer.

Measures of these types have already been employed in community and state-wide research. (See, for example, Philip L. Beardsley, David M. Kovenock, and William C. Reynolds, Measuring Public Opinion on National Priorities [Beverly Hills: SAGE American Politics Series, 1974], and the materials listed in the bibliography in a memorandum I shall forward to you on my return to Orono.) The measures have been shown to be valid when judged by a variety of criteria--and to be reasonably reliable. The advantages of the measures are numerous; among these advantages are: (1) They measure preferences regarding crucial public policy domains. (2) The policy domains tend to remain relatively stable across time. (The "space" program is perhaps the only totally new spending category to arise in the last 25 years.) (3) The measures force preferences for the allocation of scarce resources to a constant sum. (4) The measures of citizens' preferences are in the same units as the corresponding public policies: dollars. (5) The measures would appear to have potentially useful applications in all 13 types of analytic endeavors listed in Part I, above, and would seem to be superior to existing measures employed in several of those undertakings.

If invited to participate in the NES Seminar I would be happy to prepare a more extensive working paper regarding the construction and utilization of this new set of issue measures. I would also look forward to the feedback I would receive from my fellow Seminar participants.

Thanks again, Ben, for alerting my office to the immediately impending deadline for this "application." I am not at all certain that this note meets the specifications for such applications. Perhaps by the time I return to Orono a description of the application procedure will have arrived--and I can learn how far off the mark this letter may be.

Sincerely yours,



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cc: Professor David Sears
NES Board of Overseers