

September 27, 1977

Board of Overseers  
National Election Studies  
P.O. Box Z  
Stanford, CA 94305

Gentlemen:

I would like to attend the Stanford Conference to be held in January. I have worked primarily in the area of cognitive biases described on page 8 of the memorandum describing the conference. Some of the issues I would be prepared to discuss include the following:

(1) My work with Wilson (e.g. Psych. Rev., 1977, 84, 231-259) indicates that people's reports about the factors influencing their judgments are extremely inaccurate, and their predictions about how various factors might influence their judgments are at least equally inaccurate. I am prepared to argue that research in the political domain that involves asking people for reports or predictions about influences on their political judgments and behavior could have little value. One of the chief implications for research in this area is that it should utilize experimental procedures heavily.

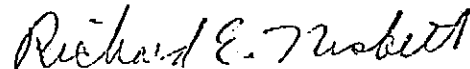
(2) My work with Borgida (Nisbett and Borgida, JPSP, 1975, 32, 932-943; Nisbett, Borgida, Crandall and Reed, in J. Carroll and J. Payne, Eds., Cognition and Social Behavior, 1976) indicates that people give too much weight to vivid, concrete information of little evidential value and too little weight to information of strong evidential value that is relatively pallid and abstract. Thus, for example, people are more influenced by a "Man - Who" statistic (as in "I know a man who...") than by large sample, unbiased, logically compelling statistics such as are dear to the hearts of policy planners and experts. President Carter's TV debate with Ford provided what is for me a classic example of the effective use of the Man - Who statistic. In support of his proposed revision of the tax laws, Carter described a dentist making \$100,000 a year who paid no income tax because he was able to write off his investments in pornographic films as heavy losses.

September 27, 1977

(3) Stemming from my work on dispositional vs. situational attribution for behavior (with E. E. Jones), I am fascinated by the public's perception of the way policy issues are resolved by our leaders. People (erroneously, I believe) perceive political decisions to be primarily the result of personal dispositions on the part of leaders (greed, war-mongering tendencies, vote-mongering tendencies) and fail to realize the extent to which almost any leader, of almost any political persuasion or character, would behave similarly in the same situation. Thus politically unsophisticated people widely viewed Nixon's trip to China, and policy of rapprochement, to be a vote-getting ploy. Powerful historical forces, and the national interest as perceived by all but the most right-wing of political experts, were ignored. Politicians themselves, of course, encourage this sort of thinking: "I take my good policy stands because of my courage and morality; he takes his bad political stands because of his cowardice and immorality." Neither the public, nor politicians themselves in the long run, are well served by this sort of extreme dispositional thinking, or so it seems to me.

I would be happy to provide reprints and preprints describing the general theoretical background of these concerns.

Sincerely yours, ~



Richard E. Nisbett  
Professor

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