

MEMORANDUM OF INTEREST

ON

ISSUE VOTING, COGNITIVE PROCESSES AND RATIONAL CHOICE

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The Conference and perhaps the Election Studies should both move towards a simultaneous consideration, conceptualization and operationalization of two blocks of variables which are: first, the Rational Categories including such variables like the socio-economic status of the voter, his private economic interest, level of information, biases of the mass media, and voter's estimate of the probability of winning by the party and/or the candidate; and, second, the Non-Rational Categories, including the voter's background, his sub-cultural belief system, private experiences, perception of political events and ideological orientation. The Voting Studies should be designed in such a way as to show how these two streams of rational and non-rational sets of variables merge into the simultaneous cognitive and emotive processes taking place within the voter, resulting into a generalized issue position which is ultimately translated into the vote. Clearly, such a model is a composite of both the rational and the non-rational sets of factors that enter into the mechanism of the decisional processes, whether at the individual or the group or the aggregate level of the electorate.

The Rational Elements

It can safely be assumed that there is among humankind a preponderance of rational thoughts and rational conduct due to the unique quality of the human mind. But the rational person is often a prisoner of his socio-economic status as indicated by his education, occupation and income. A person's socio-economic status is a stable indicator of the broader private economic interest which presumably is a strong determinant of the person's political outlook. Of course, the amount and kind of information a person has, given his economic interest, will also influence to a certain extent his political views which is not immune from the biases expressed by the mass

media in one form or another. Also the kind of coverage any particular candidate gets from the mass media will to a degree contribute to the voter's assessment of the probability of winning of any given candidate. A great number of voters prefer not to waste their votes, hence they tend to vote for the party or the candidate they consider to have the highest probability of winning. Except for the ideologically committed partisans who tend to support their party's officially nominated candidate regardless of the chances of winning, most voters want their respective votes to count and they would tend to give those votes to the candidate whom they believe to be the prospective winner in the electoral contest. This desire on the part of many voters to be with the winner is a very common and significant phenomenon too important to be ignored in any election study.

The Non-Rational Ingredients

On the non-rational side, the voter's background in terms of his racial and ethnic origin, religion, and general upbringing will determine to a large extent his sub-cultural and personal belief system. In turn, a person's sub-cultural and personal belief system provides the context for the particular interpretation of a person's encounters with politicians, civil servants and other actors in the public arena. Such belief system also provides the personal prism through which the voter views the pertinent political events. The affective tendencies of a particular person, given his background, belief system and specific interpretations of his personal experiences with governmental personnel and processes as well as his grasp of the import of certain notable political or historical events merge with the rational stream of variables into the voter's composite level of understanding of the important issues, of the kinds of values, advantages or benefits which are perceived to be the stakes in a given electoral contest. The voter's composite understanding

of the electoral issues is neither exclusively cognitive nor purely affective, but rather a combination of the rational, logical elements along with the emotional, non-logical components. The voter's composite understanding of the political issues may either be predominantly rational or primarily non-rational or an almost equal mix of the cognitive and the affective forces operating on the person's decisional mechanism. What is being attempted here is really a combination of both the rational and the non-rational theories of voting behavior the theoretical skeleton of which is depicted in Figure 1.

Implications for Data Collection

The data on socio-economic status can be collected through the social survey questionnaires and/or interview schedules and can be corroborated with documentary evidence, like income tax forms filed, personnel records with employers, and other similar objective materials providing that the confidentiality of information is strictly observed.

A person's conception of his private economic interest may be tapped by some open-ended questionnaire items on the survey instrument. The level of knowledge about specific types of information that a person possesses can be directly tested by some factual questions to be asked and to be answered directly by the respondents in the course of personal interview.

The biases of the mass media such as the newspapers could be ascertained and measured by techniques like content analyses of some selected news items and published issues at the height of the electoral campaign period. The biases of the radio and TV networks would perhaps call for some sample recordings of audio and visual programs and the subsequent assessment of such recordings of some panel of evaluators selected in much the

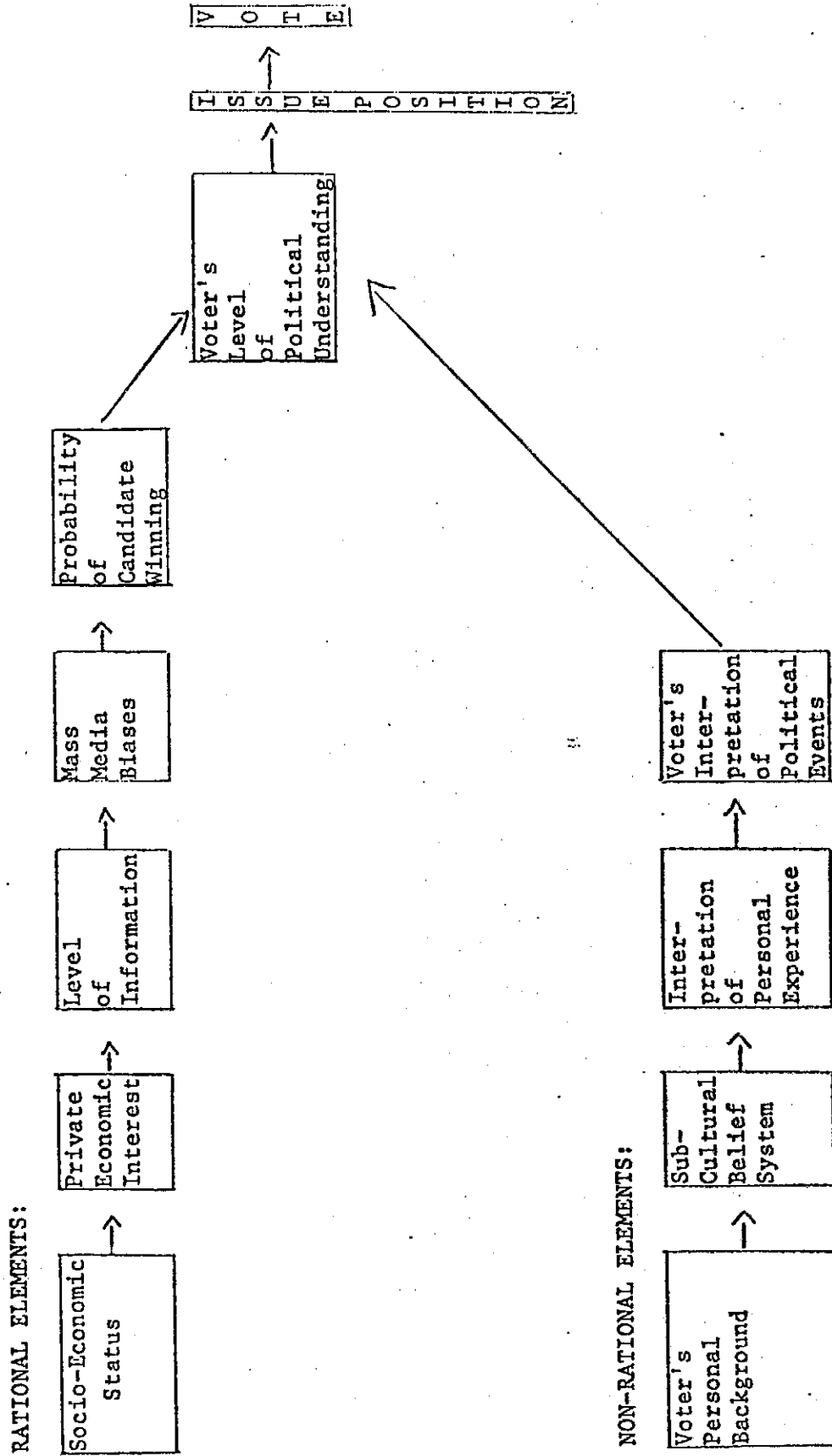


Figure 1: A Suggested Underlying Model Yet to be Developed of Election Studies of the Immediate Future

If there is any need with respect to the form of data collection, it would be the addition of some new techniques primarily in the form of corroborative documentary evidence. The important direction for the Conference to consider, and for the Election Studies to ultimately take, is to design and elaborate upon a composite model of both rational and primarily economic factors and the non-rational and mostly non-economic determinants of voting decision and of the consequent electoral behavior at the individual, group and aggregate levels of analysis.