

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

Issue voting has been a special concern of political scientists interested in democratic theory and in the behavior of the citizenry. At the same time, voting is a particular case of individual and collective decision-making, topics which are treated more generally in the rational choice theories of economics and in theoretical and empirical work on information processing, attitude change, and cognitive processes in psychology and social psychology. A variety of disciplines and theoretical traditions, therefore, can help illuminate substantive questions about voting behavior. By the same token, the study of voting behavior provides an arena in which scholars with more general interests can test and refine their theories.

One central empirical question about issue voting concerns the decision-making processes by which individuals translate policy-related preferences into votes. Other important questions concern the origins of policy preferences, and their nature and structure. An extensive literature has examined such questions, especially in the context of U.S. presidential elections. But a variety of theoretical, empirical and methodological developments have occurred in recent years which are potentially relevant to these questions but which have not always been reflected in the voting behavior literature. The time seems ripe to enrich our thinking about issue voting.

Some models, for example, propose that citizens make rational calculations about vote decisions from policy preferences, and about

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policy preferences from their private interests. In such rational choice models, errors are usually assumed to be random and unsystematic. On the other hand, recent developments in cognitive and social psychology have explored certain systematic errors people appear to make in information processing and decision making. And cognitive consistency theories suggest that empirically observed correspondences between policy preferences and votes may well be artifacts of pre- or post-choice consistency pressures (i.e., rationalization) rather than of policy-oriented choices. Models of rational behavior under conditions of limited information point in some similar directions. Other lines of research have broadened the search for effective inputs to the voting decisions, away from an exclusive reliance on the voter's attitudes about public issues, to greater attention to the personal impact of political events, whether economic experience or personal contacts with integration or crime. The theory and technology of measurement and scaling offer new approaches to the assessment of policy preferences which are little known to most political scientists.

The national election studies carried out by the Center for Political Studies (University of Michigan), with their large sample surveys of the American population, have long been a major source of data for the study of issue voting and individual decision making. Now that the election studies have been funded by the National Science Foundation on a long-term, national resource basis, there is both need and opportunity to enhance the value of these data by taking full account of the insights and concerns of a broad range of scholars. While one important priority of the election studies will be to continue the time series collection

of data on presidential and off-year congressional elections begun in 1952, new theoretical points of view need to be incorporated into the election series, and innovative methods of measurement--perhaps including whollynew types of data collection--should be considered.

This memo proposes a conference to begin this process. Its main function will be to bring these several lines of intellectual work, each of which has proceeded rather independently of research on voting behavior, into contact with the substantive problems posed by issue-based voting and with scholars who are already doing research in this area. It is hoped that the conference will point the way to some imaginative new perspectives on voting behavior, as well as, perhaps, affording scholars in other areas a new substantive arena in which to apply their thinking.

The conference will attempt to identify the major research questions concerning issue voting and the most promising lines of theory bearing upon them, and to suggest alternative research designs and measurement techniques for the collecting of relevant data. After the conference, one or more small working groups will help the election studies staff plan, pre-test and implement some concrete measurement steps. The conference may also produce some suggestions for long-range or large-scale innovations which cannot be implemented at once, but will feed into future planning and perhaps into new funding proposals by the election study board or by independent scholars. The conference itself is intended to be a wide-ranging exploration, in which fundamental questions are raised and there is vigorous interaction among diverse viewpoints.

The agenda of the conference is an open one, to be determined largely by the suggestions we receive from participants and others. We expect to be concerned with three broad categories of research questions; 1) the nature and structure of the public's policy preferences; 2) the origins of such preferences (with a primary focus upon contemporary information-processing rather than upon longer-term historical processes such as socialization or psychological development); and 3) the impact of such policy preferences upon individual voting decisions. Thus the conference will be concerned both with cognitive processes involved in decision making and with the specific inputs that the voter considers in attitude formation and voting decisions.

Some of the most obvious research questions within these categories are: how important is issue voting as compared, say, to reliance on party identification or evaluations of candidates' personalities? To what degree do citizens display a calculated, instrumental approach to voting? To what degree are they swayed by predictable cognitive biases? Is issue voting primarily prospective or retrospective, oriented toward future policy or past performance? What part do variations in salience play; are citizens divided into "issue publics" focused on particular sets of concerns? To what extent are personal experiences and life circumstances translated into policy preferences and votes, and with what biases? To what extent and in what ways are issue orientations structured? How, precisely, are they converted into votes? These questions can be approached in a variety of ways. One paradigm for issue voting is that of the spatial models drawn from economics, which postulate that citizens have policy preferences located in an issue space, and vote for the candidate or party they perceive to be closest to them in that

space. Recent election studies have relied heavily on this tradition by using 7-point opinion and perception scales from which measures of perceived issue proximity can be calculated and related to evaluations or the vote. The conference may want to consider whether this is a fruitful approach to the study of issue voting, and, if so, whether alternative measures of similar types or modifications in the scales would be desirable. The merits of returning to the earlier (1952-60) question formats can also be considered. Further topics could include how to get at tradeoffs between policies, and how to measure indifference curves or utility functions; to what degree continuity should be maintained from one election to the next in definition of issues and specification of stimulus figures like candidates; how to make decisions on the inclusion of new issues or candidates, and how to design and pre-test items.

Cognitive consistency theories and considerations of rationality under limited information suggest that perceptions of candidates' stands should not be taken as universally shared or objectively determined. In particular, perceptions of where candidates stand (and indeed citizens' issue orientations also) may be influenced by how they feel about the candidates, as well as vice versa. Simple analyses of relationships between issue proximities and votes may therefore confound processes of rationalization, projection, selective perception, and persuasion, with issue voting. The conference may want to consider the problems of causal inference involved in disentangling the various processes. Do simultaneous equation techniques offer promising solutions? If so, what are the design implications--for example, what sorts of exogenous variables should be included in survey instruments? Alternatively, the possibility

of other data collection methods might be considered, including experimentation, or the fielding of a fine-grained, multi-wave panel study with interviews at frequent intervals, which might capture the development of perceptions and issue orientations and candidate evaluations over time, and thereby resolve questions of causal direction by reference to temporal priority. The usefulness of objective (rather than perceptual) measures of candidates' stands and of information transmitted by the media might also be considered.

A different approach to issue voting, also growing out of the spatial modelling literature, uses factor analytic or other dimensional techniques to infer the nature and importance of issue dimensions from the patterns of candidate and party evaluations. The CPS "feeling thermometer" scales have been much used for this purpose. The conference may want to consider how valuable thermometers or analogous measures are, and whether or how they should be modified; which candidates and other political figures or groups should be evaluated on thermometers; and what guidelines and procedures might be developed to preserve continuity of measurement but also provide for changes in the relevant set of political figures from one election to the next.

Still another tradition in issue voting research emphasizes variations among citizens concerning which issues are seen as important and/or how an issue space is structured. It is argued, for example, that members of various "issue publics" attend only to one or a few issues of special relevance to themselves. This raises some general questions about the nature of belief systems and cognitive structuring. Recent CPS election studies have responded to these concerns by trying to elicit the salience of responses to closed issue items, by allowing

respondents to name their own "most important problems", and by coding issue-related responses to the open-ended questions about likes and dislikes of candidates and parties. The conference may want to consider how fruitful this general approach is in comparison to others; how best to measure the salience of policy preferences and the structure of issue spaces; and what are the merits of various open-ended measures. Problems of causal inference might also be considered.

A rather different approach to issue voting emphasizes retrospective voting, the evaluation of past performance rather than the voting of future policy preferences. Among political scientists, this line of research is associated with the ideas of referenda on performance, government accountability, and the rule of anticipated reactions; for economists and psychologists it has to do with information costs and information processing, and the question of how individuals predict future performance in a world of uncertainty. From either perspective, a citizen's direct personal experiences seem of great potential relevance to his over-all evaluation of how well the government is doing and which party would most benefit him in the future, as well, perhaps, as what specific policies he comes to prefer.

The CPS election studies have included several items concerning judgements of the president's handling of his job, expectations of which party would better avoid war or attain prosperity, and such personal experiences as changes in the family financial situation. The conference may wish to address the questions of how useful such items are, and what changes or additions might be desirable: whether, for example, questions should be added on the perceptions of government responsibility for various events and outcomes, or on the direct personal impact of government decisions.

Recent aggregate-data research on the politics of macroeconomic policy, including public reactions to changes in per capita income, inflation, and unemployment suggests that survey data could greatly illuminate the perceptual and attitudinal linkages between economic events and voting behavior. The relevance of objective measures of personal experience, including contextual data on community unemployment and the like, could also be explored. In addition, survey measurement of private experience, especially citizens' contacts with government may require special attention. Changes in politically relevant issues over time may have important measurement implications; for example measures of unemployment may be inadequate when underemployment is a widespread and important personal problem.

Individuals' reactions to their personal experience, whether to form policy preferences or judgments about government performance, raise questions about information processing and about the possibility of cognitive biases. Recent research and theory in cognitive psychology have suggested a number of such biases which have not been much considered in the study of or the formation of political attitudes or voting decisions. A far from exhaustive list would include the use of simple heuristics such as availability and representativeness; the overweighting of vivid, spectacular experiences, or of concrete, personalized information; overattribution of events to personal rather than situational variables; esteem protection, such as blaming bad experiences upon environmental, and good experiences upon dispositional factors; overattributing others' behavior to internal, and one's own behavior to external, causal factors; self-presentational biases, in which the voter attempts to present himself as thinking coherently and rationally and in a properly informed

manner; and biases resulting from perceived personal responsibility for events, or from the voter's use of stereotyped "scripts" in analyzing political life.

While these matters are most obviously relevant to how people translate their private experiences into policy preferences and votes, they in fact cut across several approaches to issue voting, including the ways in which citizens form perceptions of candidates' policy stands. The conference may wish to explore these possible biases and the measures necessary to test for them. Particular attention might be paid to problems of measuring objective experiences and realities, against which to assess biases.

Conference participation. The conference will be held at Stanford University, on January 19-20, 1978. About twenty scholars will be invited to attend. An important factor in the issuance of invitations will be the receipt of memoranda of interest which respond to this memorandum and outline, concisely but as concretely as possible, directions in which the proposer would like to see the conference and the election studies move. Memos should ordinarily be some 3 - 10 pages long, and should point toward the implications for data collection of one or more specific theoretical or methodological arguments. They should be sent to the Board of Overseers, National Election Studies, P.O. Box Z, Stanford, California 94305, not later than November 15, 1977. Conference invitees will be notified in early December. The Board will cover the travel, lodging, food and out-of-pocket expenses of the participants.

In addition to memoranda of interest, we will of course be grateful for any suggestions concerning the study of issue voting and other topics

of relevance to electoral studies by conference participants or others, either before or after the conference. Such suggestions, and general comments or inquiries concerning the Board of Overseers and its program may be directed to the Board at Stanford, or to any of its individual members. Specific questions and suggestions concerning the issue voting conference, other than memoranda of interest, should be addressed directly to one or both of the conference organizers, Professors Page and Sears, at the following addresses:

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