

MEMORANDUM

national opinion research center

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TO Board of Overseers, National Election Studies
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SUBJECT Memorandum of Interest, Election Studies

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Stanford is too far to come for a conference, but that is not the main purpose of this note.

Statistics and Interaction Effects with Measurement Errors

One main technology for studying issue voting is to study interaction effects, or specification effects. For example, we have that issues are more related to voting (1) among people interested in politics than not, (2) among political sophisticates than among political primitives, (3) among liberals in a trade union than among conservatives, (4) among people who think about politics ideologically than among those who think about it personally, (5) among people toward the center of Norwegian society than toward the periphery, (6) in recent years than formerly, (7) among cosmopolitans than locals, (8) in South American societies with longer democratic traditions than in those with shorter, and so on (various of these results are associated with the names of Philip Converse, Russel Neuman, Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, Lazarsfeld et al., Norman Nie, Johan Galtung, and by the skin of our teeth, Art Stinchcombe). Interaction effects can be "spurious" just like any other causal relation, so that the effects of sophistication on the correlation between issue position and vote may be due to saliency rather than sophistication, or the correlation may be higher in Chile (before the coup) than in Argentina because Chileans are more sophisticated, having been taught by a democratic history.

So the usual apparatus of testing for spuriousness needs to be generalized to testing for spurious interaction effects. For instance, in a regression analysis we can add the interaction term between interest and issue position to an equation that already has an interaction term for sophistication and issue position, to see whether then the regression coefficient for the sophistication interaction goes to zero.

However, as is usual with the analysis of spuriousness, this does not work unless either (1) you have perfect measures of the control variable, in this case both issue position and interest in politics, or (2) you can build a model that estimates measurement error and the

true coefficient simultaneously. Clearly that means that we need various ways to estimate measurement error of the relevant variables (thermometer scores, sophistication, interest, etc.). But I think it also means that we need someone who is good at statistical models to tell us what we need to do to estimate models with interaction effects when both variables are measured with error.

I suggest that the person ought to work first with linear models, and that the fact that the interaction variable is very highly correlated with some linear combination of its two components has to be taken into account. That is, the product of sophistication times issue position is very highly linearly predictable from sophistication and issue position, so when you add also the product of interest and issue position, you get into a real collinearity bind. If you have to estimate both measurement error and interaction coefficients with what little information you've got left, I think you are in real statistical trouble. Someone who can read the information matrix and think about the results should be got to tell us what kinds of trouble we are in. I can't do it, but the average real methodologist nowadays (who seems to be 22 years old) knows a lot of theoretical statistics that I don't that bears on the subject. Since you can't get the information matrix out of the SPSS regression program, the person will also have to have more patience with computers than I have.

Issue Voting and Leadership

A principal argument of C. Wright Mills in The Power Elite was that the issues posed, especially in Congressional elections, were elaborately beside the point--divisions over very minor disagreements about how to finance a Social Security system which both parties agree should be completely inadequate, or the ethnic composition of the slate that is going to vote to spend all your money for cruise missiles. The argument over pluralism versus elitism in local government has (finally) come to revolve around much the same issue. We tend to regard someone who is learning to speak about the morals of bankers with careful equivocation as someone who is becoming a more sophisticated politician, and giving up his impractical moralism.

It seems to me, then, that both informal leaders (and formal leaders who are not candidates, such as precinct captains or local union presidents) and political candidates need to be systematically classified by their degree of equivocation. It is not too surprising that people don't vote the issues when they can't find out what a candidate's position on the issues is. For instance, after two years in Chicago, I can't name a single issue difference between reform Democrats and the Daley-Bilandic machine--I suppose it's a combination of my newspaper and systematic obfuscation by the relevant political actors.

The first methodological response to this is clearly that we should present a variety of political objects to people, which vary in the relevant dimension of degree of ambiguity. We need some objects that

present "a choice, not an echo," and some that are systematically ambiguous. We need to have both an Eisenhower and a Goldwater in every election, to see what the effects of candidacies which are differentially clear (I think Eisenhower was as conservative as Goldwater, but who knows whether I'm right?). Since the political system does not conveniently provide this, we need to think about how to provide it in the stimuli being evaluated.

A second response is that we need to develop measures of how far the naturally presented stimulus objects are ambiguous. The general point that we have emphasized in the past is, "How can someone who doesn't know his Congressman's name know his issue position?" But another relevant variable is, "Knowing your Congressman (or precinct captain, or local union president), is he or she the kind of political object so that you can tell which side he is on?"

For national leaders, presumably the variance of placements of them by the general public measures their ambiguity. For objects like local opinion leaders, for which each respondent has a different person in mind, we need devices to sort out respondent ignorance from ambiguity in the object perceived. I don't know how to do this, but some approximations might be such objective indicators as whether they are elected on a non-partisan basis, or whether the opinion leader is in a profession well known to equivocate on their political preferences (soldiers, white Protestant ministers, public relations specialists) or very political social positions (precinct captains, union presidents, etc.).

The general point is that ambiguity is created both by the stimulus and by the perception, and that we need to analyze the impact of confusion in the political system as well as confusion in the voter.

Populist versus Legalistic Responses to Issues

I'm not sure I have the right words here, but they come from the issue context I've been studying lately, the busing controversy. Among people who are against busing, it seems that those who act in keeping with their issue position are those who believe that busing is unpopular (and that's almost everyone not severely brain damaged), and who believe that the people should rule. Those who don't act in keeping with their anti-busing opinion are those who can see that sometimes a court might rightly go against the popular will to preserve some higher value, and who will say that a public official should obey the law even if the people are against it. People who would like John F. Kennedy's Profiles in Courage would go along with busing even if most folks were against it.

We have been careful that people should not get much chance to vote according to this issue, and I am all in favor of people not getting a chance to do any issue voting on this one. Careful equivocation in

elections and clarity only in courts is what we need. But aside from this political preference, it brings up the problem that mechanisms inside people sometimes keep them from taking their own side in an argument. Some people honestly believe that fanaticism is bad for the political system, that their opponents should have the right to speak, that equality before the law is more important than the educational policy they prefer, and so on. From one point of view these self-limiting beliefs are modifications of the issue position itself. If the Boston public, eighty-odd percent against busing, does not elect an anti-busing fanatic as mayor, one could say that it is because their objection to fanaticism makes their anti-busing position more moderate. But there is a deep stylistic difference in the way issue positions are held between legalistic types who can see why the courts take legal positions against the will of the people, and populist types who can't see why judges should be any better than other folks.

Much of the preference for carefully equivocal politicians may not be the Hotelling process at all, but an objection to being ruled by nuts. Recall how nervous it made all the columnists when we found out Carter was serious about religion. Not that the columnists were against God--they were just scared we would get a fanatic.

What we need, then, are developments of measures of "moderateness of style in holding issue positions," to see whether much of the advantage of center politicians is not stylistic rather than issue centrality.

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