

COMMENTS ON
ISSUE VOTING, COGNITIVE PROCESSES
AND RATIONAL CHOICE

This note makes a few points concerning the formation of preferences, the salience of issues, and why a rational person might not vote for the candidate closest to his or her position in issue space, even with perfect information.

The notion that information is costly has seemed to be a promising way to approach the questions of why persons do not know candidate or party positions and why they often do not develop well-elaborated positions of their own on issues. To make more progress with such theories, it would be useful to have empirical information on how difficult persons believe it is to gather information on issues, that is, how much such collection "costs" them. The amount of information used to calibrate such responses could be subjectively determined and characterized as "sufficient to form a position you believe." Clearly, one would want to differentiate between issues by type, by salience to the respondent, and by centrality to the vote decision.

The Page and Sears memorandum touches upon the importance of assigning a measure of salience to respondents' issue evaluations. As I am confident that others will elaborate the reasons why such measures are critical, I will not address that. What should be noted is that salience can be conceptualized with two distinct dimensions: absolute level, and level relative to other issues. An individual may consider issue A far more important

than issue B yet consider both insignificant relative to other factors (e.g. the candidate's religion). The dimensions can best be described in terms of budgets: whether an individual prefers a high or low level of total expenditure is independent of whether more is spent on defense or on education. To measure relative salience, an instrument could use "pies" or a point system. For example, a respondent could be told that he or she had fifteen points overall. Given a set of issues (either a closed set, or, preferably, one augmented by earlier responses to open-ended questions, or an entirely open-ended set), points must be allocated among them such that the more points an issue is given, the more important it is to the respondent. All points could be assigned to one issue, or one to each of fifteen, or a fraction to each of more than fifteen, or any other division in between. Dividing a pie would be equivalent. Howard Bloom (Harvard) has successfully used similar formats--for budget questions--in a sample survey. Forcing some such consideration of trade-offs clarifies the "true" salience of issues in different areas to, for example, respondents who claim everything is very important. Such blanket statements may mask hierarchies of issues, and behavior might appear, as a result, less rational than it is.

One should also consider adding a budget exercise where respondents are constrained, by pies or a fixed point total, to make trade-offs between different areas of expenditure. This provides detailed information on an important area of preferences. To make such an exercise more worthwhile, and to provide data

useful for political economy approaches, one would also want to get some measure of how a respondent perceives increased expenditures in some area translates into increased costs impinging upon him or her. One type of question that would do this could ask, "If X is adopted, how much do you think it would cost you each year (e.g. in taxes)." How much the respondent would be willing to pay to get X provides a measure of salience. Clearly, costs can take other forms, including public programs foregone or ended.(empirically rare).

Finally, even a rational voter with well-defined issue positions and an accurate and complete map of candidate and party positions may not vote accordingly, depending upon the (perceived) relationship between issues, the vote, the candidate, and the winner. First, strategic voting would distort the relationship. Although situations with the potential for strategic voting rarely arise in presidential elections, they may be more frequent in local races. Second, our rational voter may consider his issues to be matters for private individuals rather than for public officials and thus irrelevant to a voting choice. Third, our rational voter may also be well-informed and divide the issues salient to him or her self by the level of government and type of official with authority in the area and only consider that issue in voting for that official. Fourth, if this voter sees other, non-vote, routes as more efficacious for promoting favored issue positions, the vote may be based on something else. Moreover, under these circumstances, it may not be rational to invest much effort in determining

exact candidate positions; one might simply look for an honest candidate, or promote one's communal interests. A world view that could lead to this type of behavior would, for one example, be one where the voter believed that the policy decisions he or she cared about were made by career civil servants. Thus, one should lobby them and keep the then present government in power if good contacts had already been established.

This line of thought suggests the investigation of what people think they could do and--more important--what they have done to influence policy positions. The relationship of issues to voting should depend in part on where voting fits into that catalogue. One would need a participation catalogue, with perceived effectiveness of different types of activities appended.