

To: Board of Overseers
National Election Studies

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From: Prof. Betty H. Misk
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Please consider this as a memorandum of intense interest in the January 19 conference on issue voting. I am enclosing a copy of my request for sabbatical leave which describes my own interest and current research on issue voting. As you can see, I am particularly concerned with statewide referenda as an example of a relatively pure opportunity for issue voting. Currently working with aggregate data (on a county basis in three states; city by city in a fourth), I am forced to confine my analysis to a cross-tabulation of census characteristics with referenda voting. Ideally, I would like to expand this work to the level of individual motivations. This obviously requires survey data, perhaps on selected propositions in a relatively small number of key states--which I would hope might be incorporated into a standard Michigan electoral interview.

Need I justify an interest in referenda as an example of issue voting? Why haven't we, as social scientists, studied this topic as systematically as we have presidential voting? (my students' answer to this question--to wit, because of low voter interest in referenda--is simply not supported by the data; see my comments in the attached memo on 1976 turnout in Massachusetts. I would like to make a strong request for inclusion of questions on referenda, and I believe I can offer both a theoretical justification for same as well as practical suggestions on how such questions might be handled.

My reaction to the Page-Sears memo is a positive one--I believe they have raised important theoretical questions, although they have not addressed some crucial operational problems. I can only comment that I find considerable analytical merit in several of the explanatory models discussed, and in fact suspect we must become more eclectic in our approach rather than seeking the single best explanation. On the basis of my own preliminary analysis of referenda data, I find non rational (i.e. not self interested) voting on the issue of a graduated income tax (probably because of a general mistrust of changing the tax structure), and yet very rational voting--depending on proximity to the coast--on an off-shore oil refinery issue. Retrospective--in this case anti-incumbent--voting seems to be the case on issues which involve an increase in state authority or an increase in spending. But this is only speculation at this point. What I am trying to say is that I would like to see the search for (and acceptance) of ~~xxxx~~ alternative explanatory models remain pluralistic at this point. Let's not let our currently healthy debate degenerate and harden to the level of the pluralist-elitist debate over community power of a few decades back.

Request for Sabbatical Leave, Semester II, 1978-79
Research Topic: Issue Voting in America: A Study of
Referenda in Four States, 1976-78

Issue voting has been a topic of longstanding interest--and of considerable controversy--among students of democratic theory and political behavior. Almost without exception, the focus has been on Presidential and Congressional elections, with comparisons made of the relative importance of voters' orientations toward candidates, political parties and concrete issues. Following the publication of Voting (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954) and The American Voter (Campbell, et al., 1959), both of which found that only a very small percentage of the electorate could be characterized as issue-oriented or ideological, a debate has raged over the knowledgability and indeed the rationality of the American voter.

V.O. Key argued very early ("Social Determinism and Electoral Decision" in Burdick and Brodbeck, 1959) and later in The Responsible Electorate (1966) that the mainstream voting studies were yielding pessimistic findings because of an over-emphasis on sociological and psychological variables--as opposed to a direct political focus. More recently, Nie, Verba and Petrocik (The Changing American Voter, 1976) have found--by analyzing several decades of material--that voters are becoming decreasingly party-oriented and simultaneously more concerned with public policy. But the argument is far from settled--and more important, there is as yet no agreement on the underlying model for voting behavior, which might explain the role of ideology or issue-orientation in the voting act. Two highly relevant bodies of literature center on the theory of rational choice (Downs, 1957) and various studies of cognitive processes (see e.g. Festinger, 1957).

I propose taking a somewhat different approach to the question. If we want to study ideology and issue orientations, why not examine voting on initiatives and referenda? Here, surely, is an opportunity for the voter to make a decision which is in most cases quite divorced from party or candidates. (There are, of course, exceptions--occasionally, when referenda come up simultaneously with state-level or national elections, candidates' stands on given issues may affect voters' decisions.) There have been several excellent studies of referenda on specific issues (e.g. fluoridation, school bonds, Vietnam, housing) but to my knowledge, no across-the-board studies of voting behavior (and attitudes) on state referenda have been undertaken. This is surprising, given what seems to be the direct relevance of such a study to the question of issue voting.

I have collected data, and begun an analysis, of the vote on initiatives and referenda in the 1976 elections in four states-- Massachusetts, Michigan, California and Oregon. (These states were chosen for reasons of regional variation, past history of high salience of referenda issues to voters, and research convenience--i.e. personal knowledge and access of the researcher to background materials). I plan to collect and analyze the analogous data for the 1978 election, since turnout, voter interest, and spillover from the Presidential campaign may be an important factor in differentiating between the two elections. I have found, to date:

- (1) that turnout is surprisingly high on referenda--in fact, the total vote on key referenda was higher than on the presidency, in some Massachusetts cities;
- (2) that traditional correlations of party affiliation, income, education, city size, density and the like with voting on referenda (by area) are not helpful. For example, geographical location (in relation to the seashore) seems, to date, to be the crucial variable for the Massachusetts vote on an offshore oil refinery.

There are both advantages and problems with my research strategy. A wide spectrum of issues was presented to the voters in the four states chosen, and in some cases (e.g. the graduated income tax and the "bottle bill") we will be able to compare patterns on the same issue in two or more states. At the same time, I am dealing with aggregate data (and thus must handle the problem of the "ecological fallacy"), and worse yet, while data are available in one state on a city-by-city basis, in the others they are reported by county. If this work is to proceed to an ideal conclusion, I will obviously need survey data to pin down individual motivation and patterns. (To my knowledge, most previous studies of referenda have also relied on aggregate data.) A great deal can be done with aggregate data, but we are on firmer ground if we also have survey information.

Concrete Plans for work and Financing:

I am requesting sabbatical leave in semester II of 1978-9, in order to analyze the aggregate data for both the 1976 and 1978 elections. The only out of pocket expenses I anticipate are (1) phone and mail costs, in consulting fellow political scientists in three states for background information; (2) possible travel expenses to these states; (3) typing expenses.

I have received a preliminary announcement of a conference on "Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes and Rational Choice", sponsored by the Board of National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, to be held at Stanford, January 19-20, 1978. If, on the basis of a memorandum of interest which I am submitting, I am invited to this 20-participant conference, I shall attempt to convince the participants that interview data on referenda voting is worth obtaining, in connection with

the regular studies of Presidential and Congressional elections. If such data is ultimately collected, I will need to pay to obtain it (since BU is no longer a member of the Michigan consortium). I shall then seek appropriate outside funding. In any case, I do not anticipate major expenses in connection with the initial part of the project--i.e. the analysis of the aggregate voting and census data, which I have already obtained for 1976 at nominal cost.

I hope to publish either a monograph or several articles on this work, depending on the richness of my findings.