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Title: Revealed Preference Budget Items on the 1995 National Election Pilot Study: A Report

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Abstract

Hansen evaluates the performance of the 1995 Pilot Study items designed to measure respondents' willingness to accept tradeoffs among deficits, taxes, domestic spending, and defense spending. Hansen finds that these revealed preference budget items work well as measures of citizen preferences on budget tradeoffs. Respondents had little difficulty answering the tradeoff questions and there was no obvious pattern to the item non-response. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of respondents revealed preferences that made sense. Their budget preferences were, by and large, consistent with the opinions they expressed on other issues of deficits, taxes, and spending. In addition, those respondents who gave internally inconsistent answers -- for example, supporting both budget cuts and tax cuts -- appear to have intended such a set of responses. Thus, respondents who give seemingly contradictory responses are expressing policy preferences and not, by and large, expressing limited intelligence or political knowledge. Similarly, those respondents who expressed indifference between sets of tradeoff items appear to have done so deliberately. But while the tradeoff items are accurate measures of citizen preferences on budget priorities, they do not work well as predictors of political evaluations. In particular, the items generally have little impact on affect toward major political figures. However, a subset of the items do have some effect on the feeling thermometers of political figures with prominent policy reputations when the tradeoff items confirm the policy reputations of the principles. For example, the defense and deficit tradeoff items are significant predictors of affect towards Gingrich, while respondents who prefer lower taxes to smaller deficits rate Graham more highly. Based on these results, Hansen concludes that the tradeoff items acquire predictive power in accordance with the twists and turns of policy debates and the political environment. Hansen therefore recommends that the choice of which tradeoff items to include in the NES be reevaluated in each campaign season with an eye towards relevant policy debates and the policy reputation of the particular candidates.