

February 1, 1995

To: Participants in the NES Conference on Values and Predispositions
From: Stanley Feldman
Re: Some hopefully useful thoughts on the subject

Those of us involved in this enterprise seem to believe that ordinary folks routinely form evaluations of political figures and often, if perhaps less routinely, develop preferences for certain policy positions. The question we face is: what is the basis of these preferences and evaluations? To some extent, these evaluations must respond to the day to day flow of information. Just the fact that people are *aware* of politicians and issues is support for the critical role of information. But, if information were the sole basis of political preferences we would observe a very different political world. Preferences would change systematically even more than we now see. Even more critically, if information were alone responsible for preferences there would be far less variance in those preferences and much less political conflict. Indeed, it is the systematic variation in preferences that is the basic stuff of politics.

If we were all economists we could just assume that preferences are exogenous and make a lot of problems quickly disappear (or at least, cease to worry about them). Luckily, we are not that naive. Unluckily, explaining endogenous preferences appears to more difficult than predicting macroeconomic behavior.

Information may be filtered or evaluated in many ways. There is no need for me to provide a shopping list of those mechanisms here. A great deal of theory and research suggests that people possess some relatively enduring criteria for evaluating social actions and goals. Rokeach's (1973) definition is probably as useful as any other: "A *value* is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence." The fact that we sometimes use the term "predisposition" instead of "value" is an indication that the terminology is far from precise. Psychology has unfortunately given us an overabundance of constructs to indicate mental representations. I don't think it is worth *our* time and effort to argue about this terminology. For current purposes, then, I suggest that we are trying to identify and measure a fairly small number of relatively enduring dimensions that provide a basis for evaluating the political world.

The motivation for this enterprise comes not just from some abstract discussions in political psychology but a rich literature on American political beliefs, including in-depth, personal interviews with ordinary people. These studies make two critical points. First, people do make sense of politics, and they do so by making judgments about what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, what they like and dislike. Yes, people may not be very

informed about politics or sophisticated by comparison to the elite discourse we political scientists are accustomed to, but they respond to politics much more systematically than you would expect if you simply read Converse. Second, Converse and others do seem to be correct when they attack the unidimensional ideological model of political thinking. As convenient and popular as a left-right or liberal-conservative dimension may be for simple (probably overly simple) descriptions of political debate, it seems clear (to me at least) that most people do not think in such terms. Beyond the inability of people to understand and make use of a liberal-conservative dimension, an increasing amount of research shows that most people's beliefs and values are not nearly consistent enough to support a unidimensional model of ideology. Conflict, not consistency, appears to be the dominant pattern.

If there was a mistake in the early studies of ideological thinking in the public it was the leap from the failure of liberal-conservative ideology to the conclusion that people are unable to systematically organize their understanding of the political world. The recent increase in attention to values and predispositions is in part an attempt to find a middle ground between these two extreme positions. A multiplicity of values and predispositions is consistent with the absence of unidimensional structure *and* with the ability of people to make systematic political judgments. This approach also can provide links from the survey literature to research that makes use of alternative methodologies like in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation. It should be disconcerting to all involved to have these alternative methodologies leading to very different conclusions about public opinion and political behavior.

This approach thus assumes that, without needing to have a Ph.D. in political science or philosophy, people do have relatively enduring preferences for the amount of equality there should be in this country; whether various behaviors are morally right or wrong; the extent to which the disadvantaged deserve our assistance, and more. Where does this take us in practice? Let me try to suggest some directions by responding to the following questions or criticisms of the incorporation of values and predispositions into NES surveys.

1. Do we really need multiple dimensions? Isn't the absence of substantial correlations among these dimensions just a result of a lack of political sophistication?

Parsimony is a desirable goal in the scientific enterprise generally, and of practical value in survey research where the demands for space typically far outstrip the available interview time. It would therefore be useful to find that we need only a few dimensions to explain general patterns of public opinion and political evaluation. Perhaps a few principal components will explain a sizable fraction of the various in a larger pool of scales--for the public as a whole or for just the politically sophisticated.

Regardless of how we would like the world to look, the question of the dimensionality of values and predispositions is an empirical question. As I read the empirical evidence, it is clear that the various NES predisposition measures (and measures from other studies) are *not* highly intercorrelated--even among the most highly sophisticated. In particular, measures of "social (moral) conservatism" seem to be quite orthogonal to measures of "economic

conservatism"--regardless of levels of sophistication. While it is true that the correlations among measures of economic conservatism do increase with levels of sophistication, there is still no evidence of unidimensionality even among the most sophisticated. For example, in the 1990 Election Study, the correlations among egalitarianism, limited government, self-reliance, and liberal-conservative self-placement never exceed .5 even among the upper 30% of the sample on a political information measure. Most of the correlations are under .4. In a telephone survey from the NY metropolitan area, Marco Steenbergen and I found no substantial relationship between measures of egalitarianism and "humanitarianism" regardless of the education level of the respondents.

I am not arguing that such evidence means that we should develop endless numbers of measures of values and predispositions. We still need to identify the dimensions that are *most* important for explaining political attitudes and opinions. But I do think that there is sufficient evidence to end the search for a single dimension that will explain the bulk of political evaluations. Political belief systems are multidimensional for most people. This is not just a conclusion we can draw from correlations among survey measures; it appears in analyses of open-ended comments in survey and it accounts for the internal conflicts that emerge from in-depth interviews. It may not be the most efficient result for constructing public opinion surveys but it is the reality we have to live with.

2. Do we have to ask the same questions over and over again? Won't one or two item measures do?

Survey responses are noisy. Perhaps more importantly, it is probably *impossible* to write a survey question that will reflect one and only one underlying dimension. According to the model developed in Zaller and Feldman, these are inherent characteristics of survey responses. Although I am not willing to equate a lack of political sophistication with an inability to systematically think about politics, it is clear that most people do not spend a great deal of time ruminating about values and ideals. This obviously makes it more difficult to measure value priorities. If people are unable to succinctly state their value priorities, these priorities will only emerge from a series of questions that tap into various elements of these values. A single survey question is almost certainly going to elicit responses based upon multiple considerations. For measures of predispositions to be useful, they should measure the desired dimensions as cleanly and reliably as possible. Both of these criteria require multi-item measures. In psychology, it is common for authors of measures of personality dimensions and other traits to create thirty or forty item scales to achieve reliabilities of .9 or greater. Four or six item scales would appear woefully inadequate from this perspective. We obviously have constraints that prevent us from bombarding respondents with thirty item scales, but that does not make the fundamental measurement problems disappear. In the case of survey instruments like the election studies, there is obviously a trade-off between breadth of coverage and the quality of the measures. In the end, it is hard to see how the use of unreliable, multidimensional scales will contribute the accumulation of valid research results.

3. Aren't measures of values and predispositions so highly endogenous that their relationship to issue positions cannot be studied with cross-sectional survey data?

For better or worse, respondents will answer almost any questions we put before them. Regardless of what variable name we attach to those responses they are just answers to questions. With the exception of race, gender, and maybe a handful of other variables, *everything* we measure in a survey is probably endogenous to some degree. We may convince ourselves that there is some powerful justification for selecting one variable for the right-hand side of an equation and several others for the left-hand side, but, except in rare circumstances, these justifications are simply nice stories to ease our consciences. It does not help the enterprise to try to draw a firm line between endogenous and exogenous predictors. If we were to dismiss all studies in which there was a likelihood that the predictors were endogenous we would be left with precious few survey research studies. More importantly, we would be tossing out a lot of good work along with the bad.

One obvious response to this argument is that we shouldn't rely solely on cross-sectional survey data to study the structure and dynamics of belief systems. Like any other method of testing hypotheses, the results of survey studies cannot offer proof of the existence of relationships among attitudes, beliefs and values. On the other hand, survey data do provide tests of important hypotheses that should be supported by standard analyses. I find it odd that evidence of the *absence* of a relationship between some predisposition and an issue position is often attributed great significance--"it sure shoots down that hypothesis"-- while evidence of a relationship is just as frequently dismissed--"that's just tautological". There are obviously relationships between survey responses that do verge on tautologies. But just because we social scientists imagine that there must be a connection between certain values and political attitudes doesn't mean that much of the public thinks like that.

Thus, rather than dismissing the effort to link predispositions and other political evaluations with survey data, the proper approach should be a cautious mix of cross-sectional survey analysis with other analytic tools. Panel data can be of some help, although I'm not convinced it will be a panacea. Experiments within surveys--question wording or question order experiments--could also be valuable additions. More convincing evidence could also come from tests of more elaborated models. For example, Marco Steenbergen and I found that the relationship between a measure of humanitarianism and support for social welfare spending is significantly moderated by expressions of trust in government--the relationship is substantially stronger among those higher in trust. Trust in government does not have any such affect, however, on the association between egalitarianism and social welfare spending. This contingent relationship between humanitarianism and support for social welfare spending makes it more difficult to argue that we have the causal ordering wrong. Why would supporting social welfare lead to more humanitarian responses *only* among people who trust the federal government? Why wouldn't the same story hold for egalitarianism?

4. Are measures of values and predispositions more stable than issue preferences?

The simple answer to this question is: we still don't know. At a minimum, we need

panel data to answer the question. Since NES has started to carry instrumentation on predispositions most of the available panel data are the short panels created by the pilot studies. And, in most cases, the measures of predispositions have not been repeated on the pilot studies to preserve space for new content. The 1990-91-92 panel data may provide a first basis for carefully assessing the stability (and reliability) of these measures.

However, it's not clear that even these panel data will provide much of a comparison between the stabilities of issues and predispositions. First, a two year panel may be too short to observe enough systematic change in these variables for a viable comparison. Second, reliability and stability estimates are much easier to obtain from multiple wave panel data. If memory serves me right (I don't have a codebook in front of me), the predisposition measures were not included in the 1991 Gulf War/pilot study survey. For these purposes therefore, this is really a two wave panel. Finally, and perhaps most important, there are no widely accepted models for distinguishing reliability and stability in survey items like this. As a number of people have shown, if you estimate a Wiley-Wiley type measurement model with most issue questions you obtain stability estimates very close to 1.0. With that as a baseline, it would be pretty hard to find that predispositions are more stable. Of course, many of us don't really believe the perfect stability estimates. But it is still not apparent what measurement model will provide "better" estimates. We have a bit more leverage with the predisposition measures since multiple indicators allow you to estimate more flexible measurement models. That will still not help to answer the question of whether those stability estimates are better (or worse) than those for issue preferences.

5. What are the key dimensions that should be included in NES studies?

This is the \$64,000 question. There is certainly a great deal of literature that can begin to provide some direction. Observational studies of the U.S. political culture, in-depth interviews, and other survey data all provide insights into the key values and predispositions that should structure political thinking. However, for various reasons, it has not proven to be a simple matter to translate the conclusions of these studies into survey measures.

Studies of the political culture seem to converge on a description of the values that characterize political dialogue in this country. However, as support for these values tends toward a consensus, they may not provide useful variance in cross-sectional studies. For example, it has proven to be surprisingly difficult to develop useful measures of individualism despite repeated attempts to do so. It may simply be that those of us who have tried have been unable to write good questions on the appropriate dimensions of individualism. Or it could be that, for many aspects of individualism, there is no interesting cross-sectional variance for survey questions to pick up. The observational and survey results may be consistent once we take into account the appropriate units of variability. (There does appear to be some useful variance in a narrowly defined dimensions of "economic" individualism--do people who work hard always succeed? Even defined this way, the impact seems to be restricted to some aspects of social welfare policy and the effects are always much smaller than values like egalitarianism.)

In-depth interview studies can also be valuable as long as we remember that surveys are best suited to examining dynamics that are relatively invariant across people. Yes, we can specify and estimate models that allow coefficients to vary systematically across people. But these models can't compare with the texture that can be obtained from in-depth interviews. Survey data will never compete with interviews in this respect. What we are looking for in survey studies are dimensions that are relevant to all or, at least, very many people. Some things may thus be left out of survey studies. That is the nature of the method, just as in-depth interviews have their own limitation. These methods are complimentary; we shouldn't expect a one-to-one relationship between them.

Whatever the starting point for the investigation of values and predispositions on surveys, the ultimate basis for selecting measures for NES has to be empirical. I am impressed with how much I have learned about predispositions through multiple rounds of studies. Items and measures I would have bet on ahead of time have occasionally been incredible failures and successes have often come from following directions that have emerged from the data. More often than not, it has turned out to be a painstaking process to develop reasonably reliable and unidimensional measures. I'm not sure that I'm yet fully satisfied with any measure that I've worked on.

And that is where I believe NES shortcomings are most obvious. Too many times a measure that looks promising is added to the election study instruments and left there as if it were a finished product. Instead, all of these measures should be seen as starting points for continued research and development. I think there have been some exciting additions of predispositions to the NES studies but none that deserve to be treated as core. Each pilot study is an opportunity to refine one or more of these measures, in addition to the exploration of new dimensions. I realize that there is always the great desire to see some instrumentation as "finished products" and to move on to new topics and questions. I am most disappointed that there have been few proposals to refine existing dimensions. Perhaps it is too much to expect researchers to want to spend their time on the sorts of work that needs to be done to improve existing measures (especially ones created by others). Or, perhaps researchers in the public opinion area aren't that interested in measuring values and predispositions the first place. It is easier to diagnose the problem than to offer a solution. Without a concerted effort, it is hard to see how the desired product will emerge.