

January 13, 1992

To: American National Election Studies Board
From: Henry E. Brady
Re: Report on feeling thermometer for "moderates"

What Was Done'

Using the standard 100 point thermometer format, the 1991 Pilot Study included the stimulus "moderates" as well as "liberals," "conservatives" and many other groups and public figures. In my original memorandum I had put forth several arguments for doing this. The most obvious one is that "moderates" are an important foil for liberals and conservatives so that it would be interesting to know how moderates were rated by different groups in the population. A more technical argument dealt with the question of how people make thermometer judgments about liberals and conservatives.

In simple spatial models of voting (such as the one originally proposed in Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy*) people make choices about political candidates based upon the candidates' location on a left-right continuum and their own position on this continuum. The nearer the candidate is to the person on this dimension, the greater the utility for the candidate and the more likely the person will vote for the candidate. It is well known that thermometer ratings of candidates are highly correlated with vote choices so that these ratings can be thought of as the respondents' utilities for candidates.

One of the major dimensions of political discussion is liberalism-conservatism. Downs used this dimension as a way to motivate his one-dimensional "ideal-point" model of voting in democracies. The ideal point model has also been used by psychometricians as a model of individual preferences. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suppose that when people rate groups like liberals and conservatives, they would use their distance from the group to calculate their thermometer scores for them. Unfortunately, as I outlined in my last memorandum, when only a "left" group like liberals and a "right" group like conservatives are rated, it is impossible to test whether people can be thought of as using an ideal point calculus or some other method such as a linear factor model.

¹ My thanks to the American National Election Studies Board for adding the stimulus "moderates" to the thermometers for the 1991 pilot study.

The ideal point model makes some distinctive predictions about how moderates will be rated by people. Whereas a standard linear factor model would predict that moderates, being at the center of the scale, would be rated the same by those with liberal, moderate, or conservative self-identification, an ideal point model would predict that those on the left and on the right, being far away from moderates, would dislike them whereas self-identified moderates would like moderates more than any other group. I will provide a preliminary test of these predictions in this memorandum. I will also say a few things about what the word "moderates" means in a political context.

Did People Understand the Question?

Table 1 shows that of the 1,385 people interviewed on the pilot study, 95.0% rated conservatives, 92.1% rated moderates, and 95.6% rated liberals. This suggests that people were a little less sure about rating moderates than the two extreme groups, but not by a great deal.

Table 1 also lists the percentage of those given ratings who provided a rating between 0 and 10, at 50 degrees, and between 90 and 100. Someone who is just guessing might provide a response of 50 degrees, so the fraction of the respondents giving this response is one measure of how well a thermometer is working. Of course, one would also probably expect more people to rate moderates at 50 degrees than liberals or conservatives. Thus, it is not that surprising to find that 43.7% of the respondents rate moderates at 50 degrees which is only about 10% more than the 33.1% who rate conservatives at 50 degrees and only about 15% more than the 28.7% who rate liberals at 50 degrees. Still, it is a bit worrisome to find that 43.7% of the sample can only muster a rather indifferent "50 degrees" instead of 51, 49, 55, or 45 or some other middlin' and more nuanced response.

Interestingly, and reassuringly, only 42.3% of those people who have a liberal-conservative identification choose 50 degrees while 48.1% of those who claim they have not thought much about it (and yet still provide thermometer ratings of moderates) choose 50 degrees. This is not a big difference, but it does suggest that those who can place themselves on a liberalism-conservatism scale are more likely to provide a response different from 50 degrees when they rate moderates.

Table 1 also displays the percentage of respondents who provide extreme responses for each of the thermometers. Only about 6.8% provide extreme responses for moderates, but it is hard to take this as an indicator of some problems with the question. After all, only about 11% provide extreme responses for liberals and conservatives ---where we might expect a large number of extreme responses.

Table 1.

How many provided ratings and
what kind of ratings did they provide?

Thermometer Rating for	% Providing Rating	% of those Rating		
		Putting Group at 50	Choosing 0 - 10	Choosing 90 - 100
Liberals	95.6	28.7	7.0	4.7
Moderates	92.1	43.7	2.8	4.0
Conservatives	95.0	33.1	3.9	7.1

What Does It Mean?

Table 2 shows the mean thermometer rating for conservatives, moderates, and liberals by individual ideological self-identification (v406 on the 1990 study). As we would expect, liberals like liberals and conservatives like conservatives. Moreover, as ideological self-identification goes from liberal to conservative, the average liberal thermometer goes down monotonically and the average conservative thermometer goes up.

The story for the moderates is much more complicated. As we would expect, those at the ideological extremes have the lowest ratings for moderates. In addition, those at the center of the ideological self-identification scale---those who are moderates, like moderates the best. However their rating of 56.7 for moderates is not that much greater than their rating of 50.8 for liberals and it is just a tad larger than their rating of 55.7 for conservatives. Moderates, it seems, do not provide strong ratings of anybody.

All of the preceding is what we expected. We would have also expected the ratings to then go up from both extremes to a peak somewhere in the middle of the ideological self-identification scale, but this does not happen quite as we would have liked. Yet, we should not underestimate the degree to which the thermometer means for moderates satisfy single-peakedness. If we fiddle with the mean of the thermometer for moderates for the mid-point of the self-identification scale, say by arguing that it is not really much different from 58.5, then single-peakedness is satisfied. In fact, by any statistical significance test standards, this mean is not any different from 58.5. This is encouraging, but one would not want to get too enthusiastic about claiming single-peakedness.

What are we to make of all this? Well, it is useful to look at the means of the thermometer for moderates by ideological self-identification by two other and political interest. Table 3 displays these means by political knowledge measured by v688 on the 1990 study. This political knowledge scale is the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's political knowledge. We have combined the two top-most categories of "very high" and "fairly high" into a "High Information" group and we have placed the rest into a "Low Information" group.

Note that the means for the low information group are almost identical for every ideological label. The only exception appears to be the extremely liberal group with a mean of 45.8, but this mean is based upon only 6 cases and it has a very large standard error. On the other hand, ratings of moderates do vary for the high information group. (I should provide a statistical hypothesis test at this point, but the proper statistical test requires the use of order restricted inference in which we assume single-peakedness as

Table 2.
 Mean Thermometer by
 Ideological Self-Identification.

	Very Liberal 1	2	3	4	5	6	Very Conservative 7
Liberals	73.4	70.6	59.1	50.8	46.1	33.2	32.2
Moderates	43.2	62.0	59.1	56.7	58.1	54.4	49.3
Conservatives	32.0	43.4	51.7	55.7	64.5	68.6	75.2
Sample Size for Moderates	20	108	119	326	213	137	24

Table 3

Mean Rating of Moderates
by Ideological Self-Identification
and by Information Level

	Extremely Liberal		Moderates			Extremely Conservative		ROW TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Low Info 1	45.8	55.9	57.1	55.8	56.4	54.0	55.81	55.81
(N)	6	44	61	212	112	64	151	5141
(sd)	24.58	11.66	14.87	16.00	18.09	15.55	19.991	16.181
High Inf 2	42.1	66.2	61.2	58.3	60.0	54.9	38.3	58.7
	18.19 14	16.44 64	14.37 58	18.29 114	16.17 101	17.44 72	27.611 9	17.871 4321
COLUMN TOTAL	43.2	62.0	59.1	56.7	58.1	54.4	49.31	57.11
(N)	20	108	119	326	213	136	24	9461
(sd)	19.71	15.49	14.71	16.85	17.26	16.47	24.151	17.021

the null hypothesis. This test involves mixtures of chi-square distributions and I have not bothered to go to the trouble to do the test. Let me just say that there is a proper statistical test, and I bet that the data will support the hypothesis of single peakedness.)

Beyond the fact that there is a significant difference between those with high and low information, it is also interesting to ask why those with just a liberal self-identification (a value of 2 on the scale) rate moderates so high. Does this mean that moderates hold some special place in the hearts of liberals who are not too liberal? Could it be that this kind of liberal, facing attacks at every turn in the past decade, had decided that his or her form of liberalism is really just moderation? I don't know.

Finally, in Table 4 I present the means for moderates by ideological self-identification and by interest in the political campaign ranging from "very much" interested to "not much" interested. As we might expect it is the very much interested who show the greatest evidence of single-peakedness although there is some evidence among the "somewhat" interested as well. The means for those who are not much interested are essentially flat.

Conclusions

Was this worth doing? Yes, I think it was worth the effort on a pilot study. After all, "moderates" are often discussed in American politics, but apparently seldom measured. These data suggest that there are some interesting things to be said about them. I am personally intrigued by the high rating given moderates by those who are just liberal. Why is this so? I also suspect that much more can be learned about moderates by doing some analyses using all of the thermometers on the 1991 pilot.

As for the hypotheses with which I began, I think there is some modest evidence for the kind of single-peakedness predicted by ideal point models of voting and political cognition. This is of some interest. It is also clear that only those who are well informed or interested in politics live up to the Downsian model of politics. This provides additional evidence for the notion that different kinds of people understand politics in different ways. Some people may indeed understand politics in terms of liberals, moderates, and conservatives; others may have a much more morselized and unconstrained notion of political groups.

Table 4

Mean Rating of Moderates
by Ideological Self-Identification
and by Interest in Political Campaign

		Interest in Political Campaign			
		Very Much 1	Some What 3	Not Much 5	TOTAL
Extremely Liberal	1	50.9	19.8	45.01	43.21
	(N)	11	4	5	20
	(se)	2.11	0.922	12.251	4.41
	2	69.9	56.4	53.91	62.01
		48	42	18	108
		2.18	2.23	1.691	1.491
Moderates	3	59.0	60.9	53.51	59.11
		3.62	2.0158	3.19124	1.351119
	4	57.5	58.3	53.31	56.71
		2.2175	1.26158	1.67193	1.0931326
	5	58.0	57.9	58.81	58.11
		59	115	391	213
Extremely Conservative		2.69	1.55	2.171	1.181
	6	51.5	57.9	52.31	54.41
		43	59	351	137
		2.89	2.06	2.261	1.411
	7	46.2	51.1	52.01	49.31
		10	9	5	24
COLUMN TOTAL		58.3	57.9	54.01	57.11
(N)		266	462	219	947
(se)		1.19	0.76	1.001	0.551