Vote Likelihood and Institutional Trait Questions in the 1997 NES Pilot Study

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This report on examines two sets of experimental survey questions included in the 1997 NES Pilot Study. The first set of two questions concerns respondents' likelihoods of voting for their congressional representatives in upcoming elections. The second set of about 20 questions taps respondents' assessments of traits possessed by the three branches of the national government. These items are substantively related because they connect evaluations of representatives and political institutions to electoral responsiveness. Despite these connections, we have chosen to analyze them separately because of their different foci. The first set of questions assess respondents' intentions about their voting behaviors in a hypothetical electoral contest. As such, they may be viewed as self-predictions that are derived from an array of internal political attitudes that may assessed indirectly through other questions. The second set of items seeks to quantify respondents' evaluations of major political institutions. These opinions may or may not translate into behavior, but still provide insight into political legitimacy as they attempt to discern why citizens approve or disapprove of the president, Congress, and Supreme Court. Based on simple analysis of the responses to all of these questions, we make recommendations about which are valuable enough to be retained in future NES studies.

Likelihood of Voting for the Incumbent Representative

Two questions in the pilot study asked respondents about their chances of voting for their current House incumbents were an election to be held immediately. These items were included in the pilot study in an effort to allow for uncertainty in vote intentions. Most major surveys, including the NES, traditionally ask how respondents will vote in an upcoming election with certainty; that is, the responses must be dichotomous. Because people are inherently uncertain about politics and their future voting patterns (Alvarez 1996), the new questions allow respondents to report varying amounts of confidence in their own behaviors.

These sorts of questions are unusual for a couple of reasons. First, they were asked in a nonelection year though the traditional NES surveys are always conducted in even-numbered election years. These items ask respondents to predict their own behaviors in a hypothetical election after their representatives have served half of their terms.[1] Because 1997 was not a congressional election year, these evaluations are purely retrospective (Fiorina 1981). Without a challenger for comparison, respondents are reporting their own likelihoods of voting for incumbents based (almost) solely on their records in office. Second, unlike the traditional closed-ended vote questions, these are not dichotomous. Rather than asking which candidate a person will vote for, respondents are asked about their tendencies or likelihoods of voting for the incumbent.

The first question asks respondents whether they are "very likely," "somewhat likely," "not very likely", or "not at all likely" to vote for their current representatives. The response rate

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[1] There is concern that respondents may not feel committed to their answers to these questions since the hypothetical situation presented to them (i.e., an election held today) is unrealistic.

for the question is more than sufficient (94.6%) as is the distribution of responses.[2] As one might

expect given the high reelection rates of incumbent House members (e.g., Jacobson 1997), about

two-thirds of respondents were likely to vote their representatives; 37.4% were "very likely,"

38.2% were "somewhat likely," 9.6% were "not very likely," and 14.8% were "not at all likely" to

do so. In sum, roughly three-fourths of respondents were leaning towards voting for their

representative while the remaining one-fourth were leaning against doing so.

Consider now the responses to the second question dealing with the likelihood of voting

for the incumbent representative. Respondents were asked "how likely" they were to vote for

their representatives on a scale from zero ("no chance") to 100 ("certain"). Though not presented

to respondents as such, numbers along this scale were probably interpreted by the respondents as

percentages since they range from zero to 100. Unlike the other likelihood question and

traditional vote intention questions, which are discrete, this one is (nearly) continuous. This

makes the questions nearly identical to those used by Burden (1997) in his study of "probabilistic"

voting. Respondents in his study were explicitly asked for the "percent chance" of voting for each

candidate; the questions were shown to be quite reliable and valid. Response rates were high as

they are here (92.6%). Responses to the question in the pilot study may be found in Table 1.

Though some clumping occurs at zero and 100 percent, values are well disbursed. The responses

have a mean of 62.6 and a standard deviation of 35.6. In percentage terms, the "typical"

respondent has about a 63 percent chance of voting for her or his representative. If we consider

those who report values above 50 to be "likely" to vote for their representative, then 76.9% fall

into this category. This value is similar to that found using the four-category question.

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[2] Response rates for the 1997 pilot study questions are unusually high compared to other cross-sectional surveys since the respondents are part of a panel. Self-selection and stimulation from participating in the 1996 study are contributors to this high rate.

[Table 1 about here]

In some ways, the value of these likelihood questions will not be known until November 1998 when respondents may actually vote for members of Congress. If they were to be reinterviewed after the election, we would know how well their self-reported intentions predicted their (self-reported) behavior. Burden (1997) has shown that these responses predict quite well, though his study was in the field weeks before the election rather than one year before.

Comparisons with Feeling Thermometers

One might be concerned that the likelihood questions are merely proxies for general evaluations of or attitudes towards respondents' representatives rather than genuine estimates of future voting behavior. If so, they should correlate highly with evaluative measures such as feeling thermometers. However, the correlations of the two likelihood questions with thermometer ratings are .65 and .66 while their correlation with one another is .82. Further, the mean likelihood of voting for the incumbent is 92.8 for those who are "very likely" to do so and just 11.0 for those who are "not at all likely." So the likelihood responses demonstrate some behavior that is independent of simple evaluations.

The likelihood questions also exhibit more (nonrandom) variation than thermometer questions. This can be seen by comparing responses of respondents with incumbents of different parties. To do this we have augmented the pilot study dataset by coding the parties of House members for each respondent.[3] We would expect respondents who identify with the party of their representatives to have more positive attitudes towards them and be more likely to vote for them.

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[3] The codings are taken from the official Internet site maintained by the House of Representatives Clerk. While a national sample of adults is not the same as a sample of congressional districts, district-level variables probably work adequately as explanatory variables. Democrats were 47.3% of the House (205 out of 433) at the time of the survey while 37.6% of respondents (207 out of 551) live in districts represented by Democrats. Bernie Sanders is the only minor party member in the House and no respondents were drawn from his district.

Table 2 reports mean values of the continuous likelihood question by respondents' party affiliations and the party of their House incumbents. The table shows that Democrats are significantly more likely to vote for Democratic incumbents, as are Republicans for Republican incumbents. Independents appear slightly more likely to vote for Republicans than Democrats, but this difference of four points is not statistically significant.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 3 presents similar data for feeling thermometer evaluations, which are conveniently on the same zero to 100 scale. Notice that the differences within each column are much smaller than was the case for the vote likelihoods in the previous table. Democrats gave incumbents of their own party ratings about 12 points higher than for Republican representatives. Republican respondents evaluated incumbents of their own party only five points higher than Democratic incumbents. Again, the differences are not statistically significant for Independents. These results suggest that partisan biases in evaluating members in Congress are relatively small. Yet these small tendencies are exaggerated greatly when it comes to voting behavior. Partisan differences in vote likelihoods are 25 to 30 points but attitudinal differences are just five to 10 points.[4]

[Table 3 about here]

Another interesting difference that can been seen by comparing Tables 2 and 3 is the number of cases available for analysis. Despite the fact that these respondents are familiar with feeling thermometer type questions due to their experience with them in the 1996 NES, response rates are actually *higher* for the likelihood question. Only 491 people provided thermometer ratings of their representatives while 510 answered the continuous likelihood question and 521 answered the four-category likelihood item. This implies that respondents do not have a difficult

time thinking of their vote intentions in continuous or probabilistic terms. Theoretically we believe that a continuous measure is an improvement over the dichotomous measure because it conveys more information by allowing uncertainty to be reported in a more meaningful way. As a practical matter, recent empirical research has shown that closed-ended questions with more response categories are more reliable and valid than those with fewer categories (Alwin 1997).

In summary, we think both of the new questions are useful for considering both how respondents view their representatives and how these attitudes will affect their likelihoods of voting for them. We prefer the continuous measure to the four-point scale because the responses have a more intuitive interpretation and the represent more of the variation in vote intentions that we believe really exists across respondents. While we do not necessarily recommend that the traditional vote questions be discarded, we see benefits from using the continuous likelihood question in the 1998 pre-election study (assuming that the post-election study will still ask respondents how they voted).

Institutional Traits

The 1997 pilot study also asked respondents how well a series of traits described Congress, President Clinton, and the Supreme Court. These traits included three dealing with responsiveness (getting things accomplished, caring about what Americans think, and corruption) and three dealing with policy representation (too liberal, too conservative, and too partisan). As the Appendix indicates, respondents were asked whether each of these labels applies "extremely well," "quite well," "not so well," or "not well at all" to each of the three branches of government. Response rates ranged from a high of 546 (99.1%) for the item on Clinton not getting much

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[4] Similarly, the differences between those who approve and disapprove of their representatives' is 57.9 in likelihood terms but just 29.8 feeling thermometer points.

accomplished to just a low of 427 (77.5%) for the questions asking if the Supreme Court is too liberal. Frequencies for each of these questions are listed in Table 4 as percentages of respondents who answered "extremely well" or "quite well" to them. They may be interpreted as general agreement with the trait being applied to the institution.

[Table 4 about here]

We begin by comparing the distribution of responses to the "doesn't get much accomplished" questions. As might be expected, ratings of Congress were the lowest of the three institutions, though not by a lot. A total of 40.8% of respondents thought the phrase described Congress "not too well" or "not well at all." In contrast, 64.6% thought this of Clinton, but respondents believed that the Supreme Court is quite effective as just 71.5% did not think the phrase described it well. Popular impressions of Congress causing "stalemate" and "deadlock" are captured with this item (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

Responses to the questions asking whether the institutions are "too partisan" indicate that respondents are somewhat more likely to agree that this phrase describes the national government. Only 27.3% believed that "too partisan" does not describe Congress well, but 50.8% did not want to apply this term to Bill Clinton and 73.4% did not believe that it describes the Court. Not surprisingly, people who identify with the party of the target in question are less likely to believe it is "too partisan." Only 39.2% of Democrats but 62.2% of Republicans and 47.8% of Independents thought the label described Democrat Clinton "extremely well" or "quite well." This question evokes less variance across party affiliations for the other institutions. Respondents believed Congress to be overly partisan as 69.9% of Republicans but only 71.4% of Democrats and 75.9% of Independents replied this for the Republican-controlled Congress. Citizens of all types see the Supreme Court as less party-dominated than the other branches; just 29.7% of

7

Democrats, 25.3% of Republicans, and 20.5% of Independents saw the Court as "too partisan."

Somewhat counterintuitive is the fact that self-identified Independents are not generally more

likely to believe that an institution is extremely partisan. At least in the case of President Clinton,

Republicans are most likely to see him this way.

Since "too partisan" and "doesn't get much accomplished" are negative traits, it seems

that regard for the three branches follows a clear ordering (Mondak and Smithey 1997). The

percentages of respondents who agree that these traits apply decrease as the target changes from

the Supreme Court to the president to Congress. This ordering appears repeatedly. For instance,

58.4% responded that "corrupt" does not describe Congress well, 65.0% for Clinton, and a solid

83.5% for the Supreme Court. The robustness of this ordering suggests an underlying hierarchy

of evaluations for the three branches of government, regardless of what they are doing or which

individuals occupy them.

However, this ordering breaks down with the question asking whether the institution

"doesn't care about what ordinary Americans think." Congress again was seen most negatively as

barely half of respondents (51.4%) thought this phrase did not describe the legislature well. More

respondents thought this phrase does not apply to Clinton (66.5%) than to the Supreme Court

(60.0%). This exception may be due to the fact that the president is a person, Bill Clinton, about

whom respondents have developed rather firm attitudes, just as they would about a less distant

individual. The Court is a nearly faceless institution whose members are unknown to most

Americans. Because President Clinton has campaigned for and been elected to office, given

public addresses, and so on, he is seen as more concerned about "ordinary" citizens' opinions.

Justices are not popularly elected and a person may only vote for one representative in a House of

435. The Court is probably seen as more insulated than the other branches since it is more

responsive to Congress, the president, and lower courts than to the public. The perception that the Court is supposed to be independent of political pressure contributes as well. It might be interesting to extend these items to the bureaucracy, which is often seen as unresponsive to the public.

Ideology and Institutions

Quite separate from these behavioral trait assessments are evaluations of the ideological positions of the institutions. In contrast to traditional ideology items that require respondents to place actors on a seven-point scale ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative," these questions put fewer demands on respondents. They first ask whether an institution is "too conservative" or "too liberal." If the respondent disagrees with these items by saying they describe the institution "not too well" or "not well at all," then he or she is asked a follow-up question asking whether "too liberal" or "too conservative," respectively, applies. As we show below, we assume that respondents are answering these questions with references to their own ideology. That is, a person stating that Congress is "too liberal" means that it is "too liberal for me to approve of given my ideological preferences." The institution simply does not meet respondents' expectations (Kimball and Patterson 1997). It may also mean that Congress is too liberal for the country as a whole, but "false consensus" effects make this distinction less important for our purposes.

This seems to be an unnecessarily complicated way to get ideological assessments since the "too liberal" and "too conservative" traits are asked about separately. This interviewer script essentially makes two questions into four, at least in the way the items are documented in the codebook. In our analysis, we combine the "too liberal/conservative" questions with the follow-up to the "too conservative/liberal" question since they asking for the same opinions. For

9

example, v970211 and v970212 were combined as were v970210 and v970213. Frequencies of responses to these pairs of questions are similar, so combining them is a reasonable approach. Improved wording or flow of these questions is worth considering in future use of these items.

Because these questions ask only whether the target is "too" liberal or conservative, one can not be certain about what disagreement means. For example, a respondent who believes that "too conservative" applies to the Supreme Court "not too well" may believe that the Court is moderate (relative to herself or himself) or that it is too liberal.

First consider President Clinton. Many respondents (41.6%) believed "too liberal" describes Clinton "extremely well" or "quite well." Few (14.0%) agreed that he is "too conservative." Unfortunately, one can not be certain what the remaining respondents believed about Clinton's ideological tendencies. In fact, most respondents did not believe that Clinton is too liberal *or* too conservative. Of the 346 who answered both types of questions, 238 or 68.8% believed that both ideological descriptions fit Clinton "not too well" or "not too well at all." This suggests that most respondents see the president as a moderate.

Turning to Congress, 37.2% believed that Congress is "too conservative" and 34.3% believed that Congress is "too liberal." Though it is tempting to conclude from this that the remaining one-third of respondents think that Congress is ideologically moderate, a cross-tabulation shows that, as with the president, 60.8% did not agree with either statement. Finally, respondents were even less likely to assert that the Supreme Court is ideologically extreme. Just 25.5% believed that "too liberal" describes the Court well and 34.4% agreed with "too conservative." A whopping 70.6% believed that both terms described the Court "not too well" or "not well at all." Either respondents believe that America's major institutions are not ideologically polarized, a difficult proposition to maintain, or they are not interested or

ideologically sophisticated enough to evaluate them. It is worthwhile to examine these

hypotheses in depth, though it should be noted that respondents were hesitant to agree or disagree

strongly with any of these institutional trait items. For most of the ideology questions, more than

half of respondents chose the "not too well" option over "extremely well," "quite well," and "not

well at all."

It is possible to estimate how much genuine ideological motivations drive responses to

these questions by comparing them to the traditional NES ideology items. The standard questions

ask respondents to place themselves and other actors on seven-point scales. Along with party

identification, ideology is also one of the most stable political predispositions (e.g. Campbell,

Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) as evidenced by the strong correlation between respondents'

placements in the 1997 pilot and 1996 post-election studies ($r = .81$).

Of those who believed that Clinton is "too conservative," just 44.0% placed themselves to

the left of the president on the seven-point scale. This may be because his position is too far to the

left to allow many respondents to comfortably fit themselves between his position and the leftmost

endpoint.[5] It may also suggest that respondents are responding only that Clinton is "liberal" not

"*too* liberal" as the question states. A solid 86.2% of those who believed Clinton is "too liberal"

positioned themselves to his right.

A clear majority (65.2%) of those who thought Congress to be "too conservative"

described it well placed themselves to the left of it; 72.2% of those who thought that Congress is

"too liberal" placed themselves to its right. Similarly, 73.3% of respondents who believed the

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[5] His mean position in the whole sample is 3.2 and just 23.2% of all respondents placed themselves to his left, so
44.0% is a significant increase. These percentages should also be taken lightly since the small number of cases
makes the errors associated with them quite large.

Court to be "too liberal" placed themselves to the right of it and 73.6% were more liberal according to placements if they thought "too conservative" described the Court well.

In summary, the items asking whether institutions are "too liberal" and "too conservative" are the least useful of the items in this battery. Traditional placements on the NES seven-point scales probably work just as well and require less time in telephone surveys. The other four items exhibit enough variance across and within themselves that may be worth pursuing further in future surveys.

Civic Engagement

One might hypothesize that whether respondents apply negative traits to institutions is related to their civic engagement. Citizens who trust government, are efficacious, participate in electoral politics, and have firm political attitudes are probably more likely to view Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court positively. Some have argued that these traits are desirable for a democratic system in which citizens play a central role (Almond and Verba 1965). To examine these relationships, we examine the relationships between four measures of civic engagement and institutional traits. We limits the traits to three that do not have clear partisan or ideological tone ("doesn't get much accomplished," "doesn't care about ordinary Americans," and "corrupt"). The indicators of civic engagement are a 3-point item asking how often respondents trust government to do what is right (v970013), a 5-point external efficacy measure (v970014), whether the respondent reported voted for president in 1996, and whether the respondent is a self-identified partisan.

The relationships between the institutional traits and these indicators are presented in Table 5. Because of the many relationships involved (36), only the bivariate correlations between the items are presented. As expected, trust in government is significantly related to all of the trait

12

items. Because of the wordings of the questions, the signs of the correlations may be confusing.

Those who believe that government can be trusted to do what is right most of the time are more

likely to disagree that the traits apply to the institutions. This is especially true for the "corrupt"

trait. Feelings of external efficacy also have significant relationships with trait assessments,

though the magnitudes of these associations are smaller than for trust. People who believe that

government does not listen to average citizens also believe that our national institutions are

ineffective, uncaring, and corrupt.

[Table 5 about here]

The more surprising findings appear in the last two columns, which show that voters and

nonvoters are equally likely to apply these institutional traits. Self-identified Democrats and

Republicans do not differ from those with no party attachments. The only exception to this

finding is that partisans are less likely to see Congress as uncaring and corrupt than are

nonpartisan individuals. This result may spring from the fact that partisans are the most interested

and informed citizens, making them more likely to view Congress favorably. The lack of a

consistent relationship between partisan and participation, on one hand, and application of

negative institutional traits, on the other, makes these new traits items more interesting. They are

not mere proxies for general feelings of trust and efficacy either, though modest relationships

exist.

Table 1. Distribution of Incumbent Vote Percentages

chance of voting for incumbent	frequency	percentage
0-10	89	17.5
11-20	6	1.2
21-30	10	2.0
31-40	1	0.2
41-50	12	2.4
51-60	98	19.2
61-70	32	6.3
71-80	50	9.8
81-90	30	5.9
91-100	182	35.7
total	510	100.2

Table 2. Vote Likelihoods by Party of Incumbent and Respondent

		respondent's party identification		
		Democrat	Republican	Independent
party of House incumbent	Democrat	76.3 ($n = 91$)	51.7 ($n = 46$)	55.9 ($n = 47$)
	Republican	48.2 ($n = 109$)	76.9 ($n = 110$)	59.9 ($n = 82$)

Note: Difference of means for Democratic and Republican respondents are statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Table 3. Feeling Thermometer Evaluations by Party of Incumbent and Respondent

		respondent's party identification		
		Democrat	Republican	Independent
	Democrat	68.4	57.1	57.2
party of House		($n = 88$)	($n = 42$)	($n = 46$)
incumbent	Republican	56.0	63.9	58.5
		($n = 106$)	($n = 108$)	($n = 77$)

Note: Difference of means for Democratic and Republican respondents are statistically significant at $p < .01$.

Table 4. Respondents Saying that Traits Apply Extremely or Quite Well

attribute	President Clinton	Congress	Supreme Court
"doesn't get much accomplished"	35.4%	59.2%	28.5%
"too partisan"	49.2%	72.3%	26.6%
"doesn't care about ordinary Americans"	33.5%	48.4%	40.1%
"corrupt"	35.0%	42.5%	16.5%
"too conservative"	19.0%	37.3%	34.5%
"too liberal"	45.3%	34.3%	25.5%

Table 5. Relationships Between Civic Engagement and Institutional Traits

Trait	Institution	Trust in Government	External Efficacy	Voted in 1996	Partisan
"doesn't	Congress	-.11*	.12*	-.05	-.03
get much	President Clinton	-.17*	.18*	.01	.01
accomplished"	Supreme Court	-.14*	.20*	.02	.02
"doesn't care	Congress	-.20*	.21*	.03	.12*
about ordinary	President Clinton	-.25*	.18*	.05	.08
Americans"	Supreme Court	-.21*	.13*	.002	.03
	Congress	-.32*	.16*	.08	.13*
"corrupt"	President Clinton	-.25*	.06	-.07	.05
	Supreme Court	-.20*	.22*	.20*	-.03

Note: Entries are Spearman's rho coefficients for ordinal variables. *$p < .05$

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Appendix

Listed here are brief summaries the variables from the 1997 NES Pilot Study used in this report. Variables v970200 through v970223 all have four possible responses ("extremely well," "quite well," "not too well," and "not well at all").

v970059	likelihood of voting for representative (four categories)
v970060	"percent chance" of voting for representative (101 categories)
v970200	Congress doesn't get much accomplished
v970201	Congress is too partisan
v970202	Congress is too conservative
v970203	Congress is too liberal (follow-up)
v970204	Congress is too liberal
v970205	Congress is too conservative (follow-up)
v970206	Congress doesn't care what Americans think
v970207	Congress is corrupt
v970208	President Clinton doesn't get much accomplished
v970209	President Clinton is too partisan
v970210	President Clinton is too conservative
v970211	President Clinton is too liberal (follow-up)
v970212	President Clinton is too liberal
v970213	President Clinton is too conservative (follow-up)
v970214	President Clinton doesn't care what Americans think
v970215	President Clinton is corrupt
v970216	Supreme Court doesn't get much accomplished
v970217	Supreme Court is too partisan
v970218	Supreme Court is too conservative
v970219	Supreme Court is too liberal (follow-up)
v970220	Supreme Court is too liberal
v970221	Supreme Court is too conservative (follow-up)
v970222	Supreme Court doesn't care what Americans think
v970223	Supreme Court is corrupt