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Authors

Shanks, J. Merrill
Strand, Douglas A.

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CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS:

Initial Results from the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives

by

**J. Merrill Shanks
and
Douglas A. Strand**

University of California, Berkeley

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CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS:

Initial Results from the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives

OUTLINE

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Or, What Questions About "Issues" Should Be Included in Election Surveys?**
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What is any national election really *about*, besides the competition for power between major party candidates and their allies? In other words, what kinds of perceptions, concerns, preferences or priorities on the part of individual citizens do the major candidates succeed in activating in their efforts to influence voters' choices for President? Similarly, which of these different kinds of attitudes should be used to explain variations in the level of popular approval (or disapproval) of the incumbent President and Congressional leadership?

In most national elections, voters have opinions about a large number of different topics, problems, or other kinds of "issues" that may play some role in shaping their impressions of national leaders or candidates. How should election surveys classify this large collection of potentially relevant topics, in order to develop measures of voters' opinions concerning all of the topics involved? Put somewhat differently, what strategy should electoral researchers use in developing survey-based measures that provide the most efficient and comprehensive coverage of all the potential issues or topics that may have had some impact on vote choice — so that they can examine each of those measure's relationship with vote choice after the election is over?

This research project is based on a general conviction that satisfying answers to the above questions will not be obtained without a comprehensive reformulation of the way in which election surveys approach the measurement of voters' opinions about current or potential "issues." The primary purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussions among electoral analysts concerning alternative approaches or strategies for such a reformulation. To initiate such discussions, we present the rationale and initial results for a collaborative project in which many survey organizations joined forces to test a specific strategy for answering the above descriptive and explanatory questions. The statistical results presented below are entirely based on a pilot survey conducted during and after the

1996 election and feature five different batteries of questions about current or proposed objectives for the U.S. federal government. As discussed below, each of these question formats seemed to succeed in representing a different way in which a wide variety of topics may become an electoral “issue.”

I. HOW CAN WE TELL WHAT A GIVEN ELECTION WAS ABOUT?

Or, What Questions About “Issues” Should be Included in Election Surveys?

The general approach we are pursuing in redefining issue-related measurement goals for electoral surveys emphasizes the pervasive role of alternative potential objectives for the federal government — based on a comprehensive set of ideas about what the government should (or should not) be trying to accomplish. Different issues may be defined in terms of specific governmental objectives in a variety of ways, but they all rest on some kind of statement about a current or proposed goal (or action) for the federal government.

For some potential issues in a given election, the relevant goals or objectives for the federal government may be both implicit and highly consensual, as in the universal desirability of a “strong national economy” and the general agreement that the federal government has some responsibility for the overall condition of that economy. For other potential issues, conflict about implicit governmental objectives may be defined by disagreement concerning the “seriousness” of different “problems” that the government may be asked to solve, such as “the size of the budget deficit” or “the number of Americans living in poverty.” A third type of political issue involves more explicit (if not

fundamental) conflict over the purposes or goals which the government should (or should not) be trying to achieve, while a fourth type of issue may be based on disagreement about the relative priority of objectives where most citizens would agree on some kind of governmental responsibility.

To be sure, any comprehensive explanation of electoral choice must include evaluations of the candidates in terms of their personal or non-political characteristics (such as their “honesty” or “morality”), as well as evaluations of their past and future effectiveness in handling consensual governmental objectives. The focus of this research, however, is the potential *sources* of all candidate evaluations that can be traced to voters’ own views concerning alternative governmental objectives.

Based on this general perspective, the authors are engaged in an ongoing effort to develop several families or batteries of similarly structured questions, each of which can be used to obtain survey respondents’ opinions about a wide variety of different issue-related topics that may share the same mechanisms for influencing their evaluations of major national candidates or leaders. Before we discuss the 1996 pilot survey which has been used to test these ideas, this paper reviews several different ways in which citizens’ opinions about a given political topic may have some impact on their electoral choices. None of these distinctions or possibilities are particularly new or innovative, but the following discussion emphasizes the possibility of using a different question format for asking respondents about each type of “issue,” so that a single battery of questions is used to ask about all of the topics that may become the same kind of issue in a given election.

II. SURVEY COVERAGE OF POTENTIAL ISSUE CONTENT:

Measurement Goals Based on Four Different Aspects of Governmental Objectives

In developing specific questions that can describe the range of potential “issues” that may play some role in shaping voters’ political evaluations and choices, we believe that election surveys must also address the following general question: In what aspects of national life do all (or almost all) Americans share a basic *consensus* concerning the federal government’s general responsibilities, specific objectives, and current policy priorities? And what (other) aspects of national life involve substantial *conflicts* concerning the government’s responsibilities, objectives, or priorities?

This basic distinction is far from new. Previous research has often distinguished between different types of “issues,” depending on the extent of agreement concerning the implicit purposes or objectives involved. This kind of distinction between two basic kinds of issues has been described in terms of “style vs. position,” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954) and “valence vs. position,” (Stokes, 1963), as well as “conflict vs. consensus” (Miller and Shanks, 1996). As in an earlier version of this project (Shanks and Glass, 1988), the present initiative is fundamentally committed to this conceptual distinction and to the development of survey instrumentation that can identify those aspects of national life where broad agreement does exist concerning the federal government’s objectives and priorities — as well as those aspects where no such consensus exists, because of ongoing conflicts within the society.

The Potential Electoral Relevance of Consensual Governmental Objectives. In some aspects of national life, American citizens presumably agree that the federal government is at least partially responsible for some general goals or objectives. Thus, almost every U.S. citizen agrees that the

federal government is responsible for maintaining a strong economy and military defense. For such aspects of national life, where a pervasive consensus exists concerning both a general national objective and the federal government's responsibilities, incumbent administrations may be electorally rewarded (or gain popular support) when current conditions are perceived in very positive terms — or punished when such perceptions are clearly negative.

The pilot survey described in this paper is based on a general belief that this kind of consensus about the federal government's goals or objectives is *not* as pervasive as has often been suggested. We suspect that American citizens (and their leaders) do not, in fact, agree on both the appropriateness and priority of most of the objectives that are often attributed to the federal government, and that those disagreements play an crucial role in shaping voters electoral decisions. In many aspects of national life, both leaders and voters maintain sharply conflicting ideas about the objectives that the federal government should — or should not — be pursuing in some (or any) way. In other aspects of national life, an overwhelming majority may endorse a very general governmental objective or responsibility, but may not agree that current conditions are particularly problematic or that efforts to achieve that objective should be given a very high priority in the competition for governmental attention or resources.

Despite that general caveat about the potential for conflict instead of consensus concerning many governmental objectives, any explanation of political choices should include the electorate's perceptions of current conditions in those aspects of national life where there *is* a national consensus concerning the desirability of a specific objective and the federal government's responsibility in that area. For such objectives, the incumbent administration may be rewarded (or punished) because of sharply positive (or negative) perceptions of current conditions. For electoral researchers, however,

it is not clear which (implicit) governmental objectives should be covered by direct survey questions about current conditions, because of uncertainty about the existence (or extent) of national agreement about the appropriateness or priority of those objectives.

Evaluations of the Seriousness of Alternative National "Problems." Some of the issues that are emphasized in a given national election may be defined in terms of alternative definitions of the most serious problems facing the nation. Voters' evaluations of the extent or seriousness of a particular "problem" may influence their electoral choice through either of the two general mechanisms discussed above. That is, beliefs that a particular condition represents a "very serious problem" may lead to a reduction in support for the incumbent administration (or party) because of its failure to avoid or solve that problem. The same kind of assessment, however, may also influence voter choices through a completely different mechanism, based on disagreements within society and between candidates concerning the degree to which conditions in that area are in fact "problematic". For example, Republican candidates have often emphasized the seriousness of criminal behavior as a major national problem while Democratic candidates have emphasized economic difficulties that are experienced by low and middle income voters. Appeals based on these contrasting priorities or "agendas" may be effective in increasing or reducing support for a given candidate without any emphasis on explicit objectives or policies.

Disagreement About the Appropriateness of Specific Governmental Objectives. The most powerful policy-related conflicts presumably arise when many citizens believe that the federal government *should* be trying to reach some (stated) goal or objective while many others believe that the government *should not* be pursuing that objective at all. Disagreements over basic purposes or objectives may have more powerful electoral consequences because the policy-related conflicts

involved are (by definition) more fundamental than differences of opinion concerning the relative priority of different consensual objectives in the competition for scarce governmental resources.

Despite the potentially greater electoral influence of this more fundamental kind of policy-related disagreement, political scientists know relatively little about the degree to which a clear majority of Americans endorse (or reject) a wide variety of alternative potential objectives that are often discussed in national elections. Furthermore, it is difficult to compare the extent of support or opposition for different potential objectives because of the diversity in question formats that have been used. As electoral analysts, we need to know what proportion of the electorate believes that the federal government should (or should not) try to reach a wide variety of potential objectives. As discussed below, we advocate a battery of questions with a single format that can be used to answer this kind of descriptive question about many different potential or suggested objectives.

Conflicts Over Policy-related Priorities. Finally, conflicts or disagreements often arise within the electorate concerning the relative priority for governmental objectives that are seen as legitimate or “appropriate” by a clear majority of citizens. That is, voters who agree that the federal government has some responsibility for a particular objective may have sharply divergent preferences concerning the amount of attention or money which the government should be devoting to that objective. As with disagreements concerning the appropriateness or legitimacy of a given objective, voters with different preferences concerning the priority of a given objective may respond quite differently to national candidates or leaders with distinctive positions concerning the priority of that objective.

This kind of policy-related disagreement has been captured by questions about federal “spending” in both the General Social Survey (GSS) and the American National Election Studies (ANES). The pilot survey discussed in this paper extends that kind of question to governmental

activities in which the relative priority or emphasis given to a specific objective is more appropriately described in terms of “effort” rather than financial or budgetary allocation. The basic policy-related question is the same, however, for both types of objectives — whether the government should be putting more, the same, or less emphasis on a particular (stated) objective than it is currently doing.

III. METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND COOPERATIVE DATA COLLECTION:

Design and Organization of the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives

To explore the above ideas about the electoral relevance of conditions, problems, objectives and priorities, twenty-eight survey organizations entered into a cooperative agreement to carry out a national pilot survey around the time of the 1996 Presidential election. By the summer of 1996, it was clear that several recommendations to the Board of Overseers of the American National Election Studies had been unsuccessful in introducing these kinds of questions into the 1996 ANES questionnaire. Furthermore, no other grant was available to cover the costs of sampling, instrument development, testing, or production data collection during 1996. In this situation, the only feasible approach — other than postponing further tests of these ideas until the next national election — was to divide all of the costs for a national (telephone-based) pilot survey between a substantial number of cooperating organizations.

Fortunately, many of the survey organizations that might be interested in such a venture were already participating in the Association for Computer-assisted Surveys, led by the Computer-assisted Survey Methods (CSM) Program of the University of California, Berkeley. Since the 1980's, over

seventy survey organizations have worked with CSM to develop and disseminate software and related techniques for the collection and processing of survey data. As a consequence, over thirty organizations that shared an interest in future surveys with these kinds of questions about governmental objectives were already in frequent technical contact. Most of those organizations agreed to participate in a self-funded project in which each organization would complete (and pay for) a small number of interviews in their region of the country, and their combined efforts would constitute a national pilot survey. The resulting data for the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives (or SGO96) were therefore collected through cooperative efforts and funding provided by twenty-eight different organizations in Universities and private organizations, including five that do not use software provided by the Association.

Interest in this kind of cooperative data collection was also enhanced by the project's intention to provide all of the computer support for interviewing (and sample control) through a single server in Berkeley, so that all of the interviewing would be done over the Internet. Each organization was responsible for interviewer training and respondent contacts in their area, but all of the computer support and sampling was carried out in Berkeley. The 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives was therefore noticeably "experimental" in testing new approaches to national election-related surveys in at least four different respects, including:

- new questions to be tested concerning conditions, problems, objectives and priorities;
- distribution of the initial sample into 32 assignments for different survey organizations;
- reliance on internal funding from multiple organizations, instead of a single grant; and
- use of the Internet for all record-keeping and interviewing, based on a single server.

Instrument testing and revision for the 1996 SGO continued through September and early October.

Production interviewing began in late October and continued through February. Five of the initial

thirty-two survey organizations withdrew from the project and two others provided financial support instead of interviewing, but all of these subsamples were reassigned to (and completed by) one of the other participating organizations.

In particular, instrument design for the 1996 SGO project was carried out by the authors of this paper from the CSM Program at the University of California, Berkeley, and sampling-related services were contributed by the Survey Research Center at Berkeley. All of the interviewing, however, was conducted by separate survey operations at: Cornell University, Columbia University, the University of Massachusetts, Millersville University, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Virginia, the University of South Carolina, Florida State University, the University of Florida, Auburn University, the University of Tennessee, Indiana University, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Illinois (Chicago), Michigan State University, the University of Wisconsin (Madison), Wilder Research (Minnesota), Iowa State University, the University of Texas (Austin), the University of North Texas, Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, the University of Nevada (Reno), California State University (San Francisco), and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). In addition, financial support was provided by Charlton Research (San Francisco) and CBS News in order to compensate other participants for conducting interviews in their subsample. As a condition for participation and financial support from all of these organizations, the resulting data will not be distributed beyond these organizations until the beginning of 1999.

Together, these organizations conducted interviews that averaged more than half an hour with 657 respondents that were randomly selected from a national sample of telephone households, based on a list-assisted form of random digit dialing. Participating organizations achieved noticeably

different response rates, based on differences in their prior experience with telephone interviews of this length and content. The overall response rate for the 1996 SGO survey is still being assessed, based on reviews of telephone call outcomes for each of the organizations involved. A subsequent report will provide information about response rates and other methodological lessons in cooperative data collection, including steps that must be taken to protect future Internet-based interviewing from interruptions in network connectivity.

At this point, we merely note that the final response rate for this pilot survey will probably be somewhere between 40% and 50%, so that readers should be cautious about the precision of any inferences from the SGO96 sample to the national potential electorate. Production national surveys with random adult selection and interviews that last over half an hour can (and should) achieve an overall response rate above 60%. That kind of performance, however, requires a different kind of funding and organizational structure than was possible for this pilot project.

The rest of this paper is devoted to preliminary results based on five batteries of questions that were introduced in SGO96 concerning perceptions of conditions, seriousness of problems, appropriateness of objectives, and relative priority based on effort or spending. Conclusions from these specific analyses are still subject to change, for final weight variables have not yet been created and some incomplete (partial) interviews will be deleted from the final release of the data. In addition to this conference, these preliminary results are designed to provide background information for future analyses at several participating organizations, and to stimulate ongoing discussions concerning the most appropriate way to utilize these types of questions in future surveys..

IV. DESCRIBING POLICY-RELATED OPINIONS FOR THE 1996 ELECTION:

Distributions for Specific Questions Concerning Conditions, Problems, and Objectives

Based on the substantive rationale concerning alternative types of issues in the introduction to this paper, all interviews began with the same five batteries of questions. Each of these batteries contained a fixed sequence of items based on the same type of “issue” concerning several different (potential) governmental objectives. The initial battery of questions asked for respondents’ perceptions of current conditions with respect to implicit objectives for which a broad consensus (presumably) exists concerning the federal government’s general responsibilities. Questions in the four subsequent batteries are defined, respectively, in terms of the “seriousness” of different potential problems, the appropriateness of specific potential objectives, preferences concerning the level of effort that the government should be putting into alternative objectives, and preferences concerning the level of federal spending in other policy areas (where relative priority is usually discussed in terms of less, the same, or more spending instead of effort). All of these questions (in all five batteries) were asked before any other political questions, including vote choice and evaluations of presidential and congressional “performance.”

After the initial battery of questions about current conditions, the sequence of items within each subsequent battery shifts frequently between objectives that are more frequently advocated by conservatives and those more frequently emphasized by liberals. The intended effect within each battery was to quickly expose all respondents to some statements about national or governmental objectives (or problems) with which they can easily agree *and* to other statements that they clearly reject, and to ensure that all respondents continued to be asked about some objectives that they supported *and* some that they opposed. These planned switches between objectives that appealed

to conservative versus liberal voters also reduced the likelihood that respondents would provide questions based on an inappropriate pattern or “response set.”

In each of the following sections, statistical results for specific questions are reviewed in the order they were asked, rather than grouping the stated objectives into more general topics, or into those frequently emphasized by liberals versus conservatives.

Perceptions of Current Conditions for Consensual Objectives. As stated above, each SGO96 interview began with a series of questions that asked “how close” the respondent thought current conditions in the United States were to goals or objectives that are presumably shared by the overwhelming majority of Americans. In particular, each respondent was asked how close the country was currently to:

- having a strong economy;
- where most people can walk in their neighborhoods without much danger of theft or violence;
- where almost any citizen who wants to work can find a job;
- having an effective defense against any military attack on this country or its allies;
- where citizens who work hard over time have a decent chance of achieving financial success;
- and
- where most of today’s teenagers will have a good standard of living when they are adults.

Respondents used the same set of response categories to describe the nation’s current situation for each of the above aspects of national life, ranging from “very close to,” “somewhat close to,” “not too close to,” or “a long way from” the stated condition. The percentage distributions for all six conditions across those fixed response categories are shown in Table 1.

The percentages who chose these fixed categories are not strictly comparable across the six conditions, because of inevitable differences between topics in the thresholds used to define positive or desirable conditions. Nevertheless, many observers will be interested in comparing different

aspects of national life in terms of the percentages who described the United States as “very” or “somewhat” close to the above (stated) circumstances. Thus, 56% of SGO96 respondents saw the United States as currently very or somewhat close to having a “strong economy,” 57% saw the U.S. as very or somewhat close to where “citizens who work hard over time have a decent chance of achieving financial success,” 64% saw the U.S. as very or somewhat close to where “almost any citizen who wants to work can find a job,” and 72% saw the U.S. as very or somewhat close to having an “effective defense” against any military attack. In contrast, only 32% saw the current U.S. as very or somewhat close to where “most people can walk in their own neighborhoods without much fear of theft or violence,” and only 39% said that the country was very or somewhat close to where most of today’s teenagers will have a “good economic standard of living when they are adults.”

Relatively few aspects of national life can be described in terms of implicit goals or objectives that are almost universally shared or accepted. In the course of testing and revising the SGO96 interview schedule, questions about several current “conditions” (such as universal access to health care) were rewritten in terms of the perceived seriousness of a suggested national problem (discussed in the next section below) because volunteer respondents did *not* agree with the implicit appropriateness of that objective for the federal government.

Assessments of “Seriousness” for Alternative Potential Problems. The second major battery in the SGO96 questionnaire asked respondents to evaluate a series of suggestions concerning potential “problems” for the country as a whole. In particular, respondents were asked to classify each of the following suggestions as “not really a problem,” a “small problem,” a “serious problem,” or an “extremely serious problem”:

- the size of the federal budget deficit;
- the number of black people who face discrimination in hiring or promotion;
- the condition of our environment and natural resources;
- the amount of poverty in the U.S.;
- the number of people who have to pay the federal government too much in taxes;
- the number people who can't afford health insurance;
- the number of people who commit crimes and then aren't punished severely enough by the justice system;
- the amount of illegal drug use;
- the number of middle-income people who are likely to face economic difficulty over the next 10 years of so; and
- the amount of crime that you think will be faced by the average person 20 years or so from now.

Table 2 presents the percentage distributions for all 10 of these suggested problems across the above response categories.

Most of these suggested problems were seen as either “serious” or “extremely serious” by a clear majority of respondents. Thus, 88% of SGO96 respondents said that “the number of people who commit crimes and then aren't punished severely enough” was a serious or extremely serious problem, the same percent as for “illegal drug use,” followed by 87% for “the number of people who can't afford health insurance,” 75% for “the size of the federal budget deficit,” 73% for “the amount of poverty,” and 71% for “the amount of crime that will be faced by the average person in 20 years.” Several of these suggested problems, however, were *not* viewed so unanimously, and substantial numbers of respondents classified some suggestions as only a “small problem,” or “not really a problem.” In particular, 56% of the SGO sample regarded “the number of black people who face discrimination in hiring or promotion” as a small or non-existent problem, followed by 35% for “the number of people who have to pay... too much in taxes,” and 33% for “the condition of our environment and national resources.” The two major parties have usually emphasized different sets of problems or “agendas” for the country as a whole, and SGO96 respondents were no different in that respect.

Preferences Concerning the Appropriateness of Alternative Governmental Objectives. The third basic SGO battery asked each respondent about the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of a series of potential objectives for the federal government. For each of these suggested objectives, we expected that many respondents would clearly prefer that the federal government *should* try to achieve that objective, while another group would say that the government *should not*. This battery of questions was designed to document those aspects of national life where we expected to see a substantial amount of conflict concerning the federal government's basic purposes or objectives. For many potential objectives, however, we were unsure how much conflict (or agreement) we would find.

The list of stated or suggested objectives is fairly long, and covers most (if not all) of the aspects of national life where observers have suggested some kind of underlying disagreement concerning the goals, objectives, or purposes of the federal government. Table 3 presents the precise wording and the distribution of responses for each of those suggestions, based on the simple choice between "Yes, the government should" and "No, the government should not" try to pursue that objective — with separate categories for those who said their answer would "depend" on some clarification, and those who didn't know or did not provide any response.

Several of these suggested objectives were accepted by substantial majorities. Thus, 83% said that the federal government *should* "maintain military forces that are stronger than those of any other country," followed by 74% for making sure that "all Americans have health insurance," 67% for cutting income taxes "in some way," and 64% for making sure that "every American who wants to work can find a job." Smaller majorities indicated that the federal government should "allow homosexuals to serve in the U.S. armed forces" (59%), change the U.S. constitution to add an amendment that "requires the federal budget to be balanced every year" (58%), make sure that "all public school students have the opportunity to pray as a part of some official school activity" (57%),

make “persons with higher incomes pay a larger percentage of their income in taxes than persons with lower incomes” (56%), and make it “illegal to sell or distribute pornography to anyone” (55%).

Other suggested objectives, however, were opposed by majorities of SGO respondents, led by 70% who thought that the federal government should *not* “give racial minorities some preferential treatment in hiring for government jobs,” 68% who thought that the federal government should not “eliminate the Department of Education in Washington,” 54% who thought that the government should not “use American military forces to try to stop internal fighting or civil wars in other countries,” 54% who thought the federal government should not “put any restrictions on abortion,” and 52% who opposed giving “tax credits or vouchers to people who send their children to private schools.” Of the 16 questions about suggested objectives in this battery, 9 are more often advocated by conservative leaders, and 7 are more frequently advocated by liberal leaders. Because of the visibility of these ongoing conflicts, we expected that SGO respondents’ views concerning the appropriateness of these potential objectives would be strongly related to their electoral choices and evaluations in 1996.

Preferences Concerning the Priority of Alternative Governmental Objectives. In many aspects of national life, the federal government is already engaged in activities or programs that are designed to reach fairly consensual objectives, but political leaders and voters may still disagree concerning the relative priority of those objectives — whether the federal government is putting too much emphasis on that objective, about the right amount, or not enough. In other words, important policy-related conflicts may exist concerning the relative urgency or priority of specific governmental programs, even though most citizens agree about the appropriateness of those objectives.

To describe such disagreements about relative priority or emphasis, the SGO96 questionnaire included two batteries of questions with the same kind of priority-related response

categories. The first of these batteries asked respondents for their preferences concerning the amount of “effort” that the federal government should be placing on each (stated) objective, compared to its current activities. The objectives covered by this battery concerned the environment, punishment of criminals, job discrimination against blacks, regulation of businesses, job discrimination against homosexuals, legal immigration, illegal drugs, job discrimination against women, and gun control. For each of these objectives, respondents were asked to choose between “more,” “the same,” or “less” effort than the federal government is currently devoting to that objective, with additional response options for “no effort at all” and “don’t know.” Table 4 presents the precise wording for each of these current objectives, along with the distribution of responses across the above set of fixed alternatives, including a combined category for “don’t know” and “not ascertained.”

For five of these nine objectives, a majority of SGO96 respondents expressed a preference for “more effort” by the federal government. In particular, 83% said they wanted the government to put more effort into “making sure that people convicted of violent crimes are punished severely,” and the same percentage (83%) wanted more effort on “punishing people caught with any illegal drugs.” Somewhat smaller majorities favored more effort on “protecting the environment and natural resources” (62%), “restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy,” (also 62%), and “restricting the number of legal immigrants” (57%). In contrast, only a minority of respondents preferred more effort in each of the other four areas, led by 49% for “trying to stop job discrimination against women,” 36% for stopping “job discrimination against blacks,” 33% for stopping “job discrimination against homosexuals,” and only 28% for “eliminating many of the regulations that businesses have to follow” — which also had the highest percentage who preferred less (or no) effort by the federal government (25%). We anticipated that disagreement about the priority of these non-budgetary objectives would also be clearly related to voters’ electoral preferences in 1996.

The final battery of questions about alternative governmental objectives in the SGO96 questionnaire concerned the relative priority of different governmental activities where such preferences are often expressed in terms of governmental expenditures or “spending.” The fifth SGO battery asked respondents if they thought the federal government should spend more, the same, or less money than it does now (or no money) on food stamps, the military, health care for poor people, nuclear missile defense, health care for retired persons or the elderly, social security benefits, assistance to poor mothers with young children, financial assistance to college students, and financial assistance to public schools. Table 5 presents the precise wording for each of these questions concerning federal spending and the distribution of answers across response alternatives that are similar to those used in the “effort” battery.

Only two of these objectives or programs received majority support for increased spending, led by “health care for elderly people” (56%), and “financial assistance to public elementary and secondary schools” (53%), but none of these programs received less than 20% support for more spending (as was true for “providing food stamps to poor people”). The largest percentages in favor of *less* (or no) spending were for “providing food stamps to poor people” (30%), followed by “developing a system that would defend the U.S. against a nuclear missile attack” (21%), “providing assistance to poor mothers with children “ (17%), and “maintaining a strong military defense” (15%). Because of the visibility of ongoing budgetary conflicts between the Clinton administration and Republican Congressional leaders as well as between Clinton and Dole, we expected that several of these disagreements concerning federal spending would be sharply related to electoral preferences and evaluations.

V. ELECTORAL EXPLANATIONS BASED ON DIFFERENT TYPES OF “ISSUES”:

Vote Relationships for Specific Questions About Conditions, Problems, and Objectives

Based on the different types of “issues” and alternative electoral explanations discussed above, how useful *are* the five batteries of questions in the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives in differentiating between voters who chose Bill Clinton for President and those who chose Bob Dole? To be sure, *each* question concerning a current condition, the seriousness of a specific problem, the appropriateness of a particular objective, or the priority for a specific objective (in terms of governmental effort or spending) was included in this pilot survey because someone suggested that it *might* be useful in explaining electoral choices or evaluations in 1996. Before this study, however, we encountered a substantial amount of disagreement among electoral researchers concerning the *size* of the relationships that were likely to emerge between each of these questions and vote choice. To answer these kinds of descriptive questions, Tables 6 through 10 present the basic relationships with vote choice (between Clinton and Dole) for each individual question within our five basic batteries. As with Tables 1 through 4, these results are presented in the sequence that questions were heard by all respondents, rather than grouping them by general topics as they are emphasized by liberal vs. conservative leaders.

Perceptions of Current Conditions. Of the six SGO conditions whose distributions were reviewed in the previous section, three exhibit relationships with vote choice in 1996 that appear to support the simple pattern of incumbent reward or punishment discussed in the introduction of this paper. As shown in Table 6, the relationships between respondents’ vote choice for President and their

perceptions of the economy, safety from crime, and the effectiveness of U.S. military defense were at least consistent with the expectation that positive perceptions of current conditions concerning consensual governmental objectives lead to increased support for the incumbent administration, and negative conditions lead to a decline in that support. Thus, the percent who supported Clinton (instead of Dole) went down by 35% as we shift from voters who saw the U.S. as “very close” to having “a strong economy” to those who saw the U.S. as “a long way” from that desirable condition. Similar, although somewhat weaker, differences of that sort can be seen for perceptions of American’s safety in their own neighborhoods (with a difference of 27%) and the effectiveness of U.S. defense against military attack (with a difference of 26%).

This simple interpretation, however, may not be appropriate for some of the objectives that we had presumed to be consensual, for the other three conditions in this battery exhibit the *opposite* tendency, with support for Clinton going *up* (not down) as perceptions of current conditions in those areas go from positive to negative. In particular, support for Clinton goes up (or support for Dole goes down) by 28% as we shift from voters who thought the U.S. was “very close” to a situation in which “almost any citizen who wants to work can find a job” to those who thought the country was “a long way from” such a condition, with intermediate divisions of the vote for those who selected one of the less extreme responses to that question. Based on that result, it seems plausible that the relationships between perceptions concerning crime and national defense are also at least partially produced by the policy-related tendency of voters who are more supportive of additional military expenditures and “tougher” policies against criminals to prefer more conservative candidates — instead of a simple mechanism in which the Clinton administration is rewarded for positive conditions and punished for negative ones. Because of this ambiguity, we have (temporarily) set aside the potential electoral consequences for perceptions of current conditions in most of the analyses which follow.

Assessments of Potential Problems. As shown in Table 7, SGO respondents' assessments of the "seriousness" of alternative suggestions concerning potential national problems were almost universally linked to vote choice in ways that suggested the differential policy-related appeal of the contrasting agendas of the two parties and their candidates, rather than simple reward or punishment for the incumbent. Very large differences can be seen between the division of the vote for respondents who thought a given suggestion was "not a problem" or only a "small problem" and those who called it an "extremely serious" problem. These differences include a 45% increase in the percent who supported Clinton as we shift from respondents who thought that "the number of black people who face discrimination in hiring or promotion" is not a problem (or only a small one) to those who saw it as a extremely serious problem. Similarly, support for Clinton rises by 44% as we move from individuals who thought "the number of people who can't afford health insurance" is not a problem (or only a small one) to those who saw that problem as extremely serious, and similar patterns can be seen for "the condition of the environment and natural resources," and "the amount of poverty."

To be sure, support for Clinton does go down (or support for Dole goes up) as we move from voters who saw a series of traditional conservative concerns as not a problem (or only a small one) to those who saw such problems as extremely serious. Substantial differences of that sort can be seen for assessments of the federal deficit, the number of people who pay too much in taxes, and three different assessments of problems that are defined in terms of crime. Those differences in voting behavior, however, could also be attributed to disagreement (or conflict) about the importance of those problems instead of a simpler process of incumbent punishment. As emphasized below, a key hypothesis concerning the electoral relevance of these assessments concerns the degree to which voters may be attracted to the party or candidate that emphasizes an "agenda" of national problems which comes closest to their own.

Table 1

Distribution of Responses Concerning Current CONDITIONS

(Entries Represent the % of 657 SGO Respondents Selecting That Response)

<u>As of today, how close do you think the U.S is to:</u>	<u>Very Close</u>	<u>Somewhat Close</u>	<u>Not Too Close</u>	<u>A Long Way From</u>	<u>Don't Know, Not Ascertained</u>
having a strong economy?	13	43	25	11	8
most people can walk in their own neighborhoods without much danger of theft or violence?	4	28	39	25	4
almost any citizen who wants to work can find a job?	23	41	22	10	4
having an effective defense against any military attack on this country or its allies?	44	28	12	3	13
where citizens who work hard over time have a decent chance of achieving financial success?	17	40	28	11	4
In twenty years or so, how close do you think most of today's teenagers will be to having a good economic standard of living when they are adults?	5	34	33	15	13

Table 2**Distribution of Responses Concerning the “Seriousness” of Alternative PROBLEMS****(Entries Represent % of 657 SGO Respondents Selecting That Response)**

<u>What about ____?</u> <u>Do you think it is:</u>	<u>Not Really</u> <u>A Problem</u>	<u>Small</u> <u>Problem</u>	<u>Serious</u> <u>Problem</u>	<u>Extremely</u> <u>Serious</u>	<u>Don’t Know,</u> <u>Not Ascertained</u>
the size of the federal budget deficit	4	12	48	27	8
the number of black people who face discrimination in hiring or promotion	19	37	29	7	8
the condition of our environment and natural resources	7	26	42	17	8
the amount of poverty in the U.S.	4	18	50	23	6
the number of people who have to pay the fed. govt. too much in taxes	14	21	38	19	8
the number of people who can’t afford health insurance	3	8	50	37	2
the number of people who commit crimes and then aren’t punished severely enough by the justice system	2	7	43	45	4
the amount of illegal drug use	2	7	45	43	3
the number of middle-income people who are likely to face economic difficulty over the next 10 years or so	5	24	46	19	5
the amount of crime that you think will be faced by the average person 20 years or so from now	2	15	44	27	12

Table 3**Distribution of Responses Concerning the APPROPRIATENESS of Alternative Objectives****(Entries Represent % of 657 SGO Respondents Selecting that Response)**

Do you think the federal government should or should not:	Yes, Government Should	Depends	No, Government Should Not	Don't Know, Not Ascertained
make sure that every American who wants to work can find a job	64	3	27	6
maintain military forces that are stronger than those of any other country	83	2	8	7
use American military forces to try to stop internal fighting or civil wars in other countries	19	15	54	12
try to reduce the size of income differences between rich and poor Americans	37	3	48	11
make it illegal to sell or distribute pornography to anyone	55	3	35	6
give racial minorities some preferential treatment in hiring for government jobs	19	4	70	7
make sure that all public school students have the opportunity to pray as a part of some official school activity	57	4	33	6
make persons with higher incomes pay a larger percentage of their income in taxes than persons with lower incomes	56	3	33	8
tax an individual's income from capital gains at a much lower rate than all other types of income, including salaries and wages	36	2	39	22

(continued)

Table 3**(continued)****Distribution of Responses Concerning the APPROPRIATENESS of Alternative Objectives**

<u>Do you think the federal government should or should not:</u>	<u>Yes, Government Should</u>	<u>Depends</u>	<u>No, Government Should Not</u>	<u>Don't Know, Not Ascertained</u>
allow homosexuals to serve in the US armed forces	59	4	28	8
give tax credits or vouchers to people who send their children to private schools	35	2	52	10
put any restrictions on abortion	37	3	54	5
make sure that all Americans have health insurance	74	3	17	5
cut income taxes in some way	67	5	20	9
eliminate the Dept. of Education in Washington	17	0	68	14
Do you think the U.S. Constitution should or should not be changed to add an amendment that requires the federal budget to be balanced every year	58	1	32	10

Table 4**Distribution of Responses Concerning Governmental Priority in EFFORT****(Cell Entries Represent % of 657 SGO Respondents Selecting that Response)**

<u>Should the federal government put more, same, or less into:</u>	<u>More Effort</u>	<u>Same Amount of Effort</u>	<u>Less Effort</u>	<u>No Effort at All</u>	<u>Don't Know, Not Ascertained</u>
protecting the environment and natural resources	62	28	5	1	3
making sure that people convicted of violent crimes are punished severely	83	10	2	0	4
trying to stop job discrimination against blacks	36	40	14	5	6
eliminating many of the regulations that businesses have to follow	28	33	20	5	14
trying to stop job discrimination against gay men and lesbians, in other words, homosexuals	33	34	14	10	9
restricting the number of legal immigrants into the US from other countries	57	25	9	4	5
punishing people caught with any illegal drugs	83	10	2	0	4
trying to stop job discrimination against women	49	35	8	4	4
restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy	62	15	12	7	4

Table 5

Distribution of Preferences Concerning Governmental Priorities in SPENDING

(Entries Represent % of 657 SGO Respondents Selecting Indicated Response)

Should the federal government put more, same, or less into:	<u>More Spending</u>	<u>Same Amount</u>	<u>Reduce Rate of Growth</u>	<u>Less Spending</u>	<u>No Spending at All</u>	<u>Don't Know or Refuse</u>
Providing food stamps to poor people	20	42	1	27	3	7
Maintaining a strong military defense	27	52	1	15	0	4
Providing health care for poor people	46	40	1	9	1	4
Developing a system that would defend the the U.S. against a nuclear missile attack	34	38	0	16	5	6
Providing health care for elderly people	56	38	0	3	0	3
Social security benefits	48	40	1	6	0	5
Providing assistance to poor mothers with young children	34	42	0	15	2	5
Providing financial assistance to students attending universities or junior colleges	49	38	0	6	2	4
Providing financial assistance to public elementary and secondary schools	53	32	0	5	3	7

Table 6

Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on Current CONDITIONS

(Entries Represent the % of Two-Party Voters Who Chose Clinton; base N's in parentheses)

<u>As of today, how close do you think the U.S. is to:</u>	<u>Very Close</u>	<u>Somewhat Close</u>	<u>Not Too Close</u>	<u>A Long Way From</u>	<u>Difference (Col 1 - Col 4)</u>
having a strong economy?	68 (65)	58 (196)	45 (100)	32 (34)	35
where most people can walk in their own neighborhoods without much danger of theft or violence?	82 (17)	56 (123)	49 (167)	55 (107)	27
where almost any citizen who wants to work can find a job?	40 (103)	54 (177)	66 (86)	67 (46)	-28
having an effective defense against any military attack on this country or its allies?	62 (191)	47 (127)	47 (51)	36 (14)	26
where citizens who work hard over time have a decent chance of achieving financial success?	42 (83)	56 (165)	56 (112)	55 (49)	-13
In twenty years or so, how close do you think most of today's teenagers will be to having a good economic standard of living when they are adults?	48 (25)	58 (158)	52 (141)	58 (60)	-10

Table 7

Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on the “Seriousness” of Alternative PROBLEMS

(Entries Represent the % of Two-party Voters Who Chose Clinton; base N’s in parentheses)

What about ___? <u>Do you think it is:</u>	Not A Problem or A Small <u>Problem</u>	A Serious <u>Problem</u>	An Extremely Serious <u>Problem</u>	Difference <u>(Col 1 - Col 3)</u>
the size of the federal budget deficit	71 (78)	54 (214)	40 (110)	30
the number of black people who face discrimination in hiring or promotion	43 (239)	67 (125)	88 (34)	-45
the condition of the environment and natural resources	44 (142)	58 (192)	69 (61)	-24
the amount of poverty in the U.S.	41 (93)	56 (216)	68 (91)	-27
the number of people who have to pay the fed. govt. too much in taxes	67 (165)	49 (150)	36 (81)	31
the number of people who can’t afford health insurance	23 (51)	53 (215)	67 (151)	-44
the number of people who commit crimes and then aren’t punished severely enough by the justice system	83 (35)	55 (178)	48 (199)	35
the amount of illegal drug use	71 (35)	55 (191)	58 (190)	13
the number of middle-income people who are likely to face economic difficulty over the next 10 years or so	52 (132)	58 (193)	49 (78)	4
the amount of crime that you think will be faced by the average person 20 year or so from now	67 (72)	55 (190)	41 (120)	26

Preferences Concerning the Appropriateness of Potential Objectives. The longest battery of questions in the 1996 SGO questionnaire was designed to identify potential objectives for which American citizens exhibit substantial levels of disagreement about the role or responsibility of the federal government. For each of the potential governmental objectives included in this battery, SGO researchers anticipated some kind of relationship between respondents' opinions about its appropriateness and their electoral preferences in 1996. Table 8 documents the differences in vote choice between the supporters and the opponents of each of our potential objectives.

Four of these questions exhibited differences in vote choice of over 40%, based on the differences between respondents who thought that the federal government should -- or should not -- "make sure that every American who wants to work can find a job" (43%), "allow homosexuals to serve in the US armed forces" (42%), "make sure that all Americans have health insurance" (52%), and "eliminate the Department of Education in Washington" (50%). All of the rest of our potential objectives exhibited differences in vote choice of at least 12%, and many showed differences of 20% to 25%. These visible differences appeared for objectives concerning military strength, peacekeeping missions, income differences between rich and poor, pornography, affirmative action, school prayer, progressive income tax rates, capital gains, school vouchers, abortion, cutting taxes, and the balanced budget amendment. Furthermore, all of those differences in vote choice followed the expected or predicted pattern. That is, Clinton always did better among respondents who supported more liberal objectives and opposed more conservative objectives, and Dole always did better among respondents who supported more conservative objectives and opposed more liberal objectives. As discussed below, much remains to be done in evaluating alternative strategies for combining responses to several SGO questions, in order to produce the most appropriate measures of policy-related preferences for different

Table 8

Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on the APPROPRIATENESS of Governmental Objectives

(Entries Represent the % of Two-Party Voters Who Chose Clinton; base N's in parentheses)

<u>Do you think the federal government should or should not:</u>	<u>Yes, Government Should</u>	<u>No, Government Should Not</u>	<u>Difference (Col 1 - Col 2)</u>
make sure that every American who wants to work can find a job	69 (250)	26 (134)	43
maintain military forces that are stronger than those of any other country	52 (355)	71 (35)	-19
use American military forces to try to stop internal fighting or civil wars in other countries	63 (74)	51 (245)	12
try to reduce the size of income differences between rich and poor Americans	71 (150)	42 (218)	29
make it illegal to sell or distribute pornography to anyone	49 (240)	61 (143)	-12
give racial minorities some preferential treatment in hiring for government jobs	75 (98)	48 (284)	27
make sure that all public school students have the opportunity to pray as a part of some official school activity	50 (249)	63 (143)	-13
make persons with higher incomes pay a larger percentage of their income in taxes than persons with lower incomes	66 (247)	38 (139)	28
tax an individual's income from capital gains at a much lower rate than all other types of income, including salaries and wages	46 (163)	63 (171)	-17

(continued)

Table 8**(continued)****Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on the APPROPRIATENESS of Governmental Objectives**

<u>Do you think the federal government should or should not:</u>	<u>Yes, Government Should</u>	<u>No, Government Should Not</u>	<u>Difference (Col 1 - Col 2)</u>
allow homosexuals to serve in the US armed forces	68 (249)	26 (122)	42
give tax credits or vouchers to people who send their children to private schools	39 (157)	65 (224)	-25
put any restrictions on abortion	34 (161)	68 (228)	-34
make sure that all Americans have health insurance	67 (312)	15 (86)	52
cut income taxes in some way	47 (283)	76 (84)	-30
eliminate the Dept. of Education in Washington	18 (88)	69 (276)	-50
Do you think the US Constitution should or should not be changed to add an amendment that requires the federal budget to be balanced every year	49 (233)	69 (146)	-21

aspects of national life. Any reasonable strategy for item combination, however, will clearly include many of these questions concerning the appropriateness of different potential objectives.

Preferences Concerning the Priority of Existing Governmental Objectives. As discussed above, we also expected to see substantial relationships between respondents' vote choice and their preferences concerning the federal government's level of effort or spending in pursuing a variety of established objectives. As shown in Tables 9 and 10, very large relationships of that sort can be seen for many of our questions concerning governmental effort and spending. In particular, differences in vote choice of over 40% can be seen between respondents who preferred that more vs. less (or no) effort be devoted to "protecting the environment and natural resources"(52%), and "trying to stop job discrimination against gay men and lesbians" (42%), and equally large differences can be seen concerning the level of federal spending in "providing food stamps to poor people" (46%), "maintaining a strong defense" (50%), "providing health care for poor people" (48%), "providing health care for elderly people" (41%), and "providing financial assistance to public elementary and secondary schools" (42%).

Furthermore, all but one of the other questions concerning the level of governmental effort or spending produced differences in vote choice of at least 12%. Several of these questions, however, deal with similar or related policy issues, so that some of these differences in vote choice may be due to a smaller number of more general preferences. For that reason, many analysts will be interested in the relationships between vote choice and a variety of summary measures concerning broader topics or dimensions. Some of those possibilities are discussed in section VII below.

Table 9**Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on Preferences Concerning Priorities in EFFORT****(Entries Represent the % of Two-Party Voters Who Chose Clinton; base N's in parentheses)**

Should the federal government put more, same, or less into:	<u>More Effort</u>	<u>Same Amount of Effort</u>	<u>Less or No Effort</u>	<u>Difference (Col 1 - Col 3)</u>
protecting the environment and natural resources	67 (248)	41 (133)	16 (32)	52
making sure that people convicted of violent crimes are punished severely	51 (354)	77 (44)	83 (12)	-33
trying to stop job discrimination against blacks	73 (145)	49 (183)	34 (76)	39
eliminating many of the regulations that businesses have to follow	47 (115)	61 (132)	51 (126)	-4
trying to stop job discrimination against gay men and lesbians, in other words, homosexual	77 (138)	49 (142)	35 (114)	42
restricting the number of legal immigrants into the US from other countries	52 (236)	56 (110)	64 (61)	-12
punishing people caught with any illegal drugs	54 (304)	47 (74)	75 (28)	-21
trying to stop job discrimination against women	69 (195)	43 (157)	36 (55)	32
restricting the kinds of guns that people can buy	66 (282)	38 (68)	32 (79)	34

Table 10

Potential Explanations of VOTE CHOICE Based on Preferences Concerning Priorities in SPENDING

(Entries Represent the % of Two-Party Voters Who Chose Clinton; base N's in parentheses)

Should the federal government should put <u>more, same, or less into:</u>	<u>More Spending</u>	<u>Same Spending</u>	<u>Less or No Spending</u>	<u>Difference (Col 1 - Col 3)</u>
Providing food stamps to poor people	85 (68)	53 (176)	39 (148)	46
Maintaining a strong military defense	34 (107)	54 (223)	84 (73)	-50
Providing health care for poor people	73 (176)	45 (182)	25 (48)	48
Developing a system that would defend the US against a nuclear missile attack	44 (132)	55 (177)	67 (95)	-24
Providing health care for elderly people	62 (211)	50 (182)	21 (19)	41
Social security benefits	64 (187)	50 (185)	31 (29)	33
Providing assistance to poor mothers with young children	68 (130)	48 (187)	44 (82)	24
Providing financial assistance to students attending universities or junior colleges	66 (207)	44 (164)	32 (37)	34
Providing financial assistance to public elementary and secondary schools	65 (215)	48 (147)	23 (39)	42

VI. THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF ALTERNATIVE QUESTION FORMATS:

Comparing Combinations of All Questions About Problems, Appropriateness, and Priorities

Those who develop questionnaires for future election surveys may be particularly interested in comparing the different question formats or batteries used in this pilot survey in terms of their combined ability to predict (or explain) electoral preferences. In other words, future designers may want to know how well we can predict electoral choices when we combine all of the explanatory variables that are defined in terms of different agendas or problems, or disagreements about basic objectives, or disagreements about governmental effort or spending.

Construction of Four Summary Measures. As emphasized in the introductory section of this paper, voters' assessments of the seriousness of different definitions of national "problems" may influence their evaluations of political leaders (or their choices between leaders) in several different ways. As with negative perceptions of current conditions for consensual governmental objectives, voters who see a particular aspect of national life as a "very serious problem" may be less likely to support the incumbent administration. Most of our questions about problems, however, were designed to capture underlying conflicts between the very different agendas emphasized by the Republican and Democratic candidates in 1996.

For the following analysis, responses to all but one of our questions about the seriousness of different (potential) problems were combined into a single index of conservative vs. liberal

assessments.* Respondents who described problems that are more often associated with a liberal (instead of conservative) perspective as “extremely serious” were scored +1.0, and those who described such problems as “serious” were scored +.5. Respondents who described the same conventionally liberal problems as only a “small problem” were scored as -.5, and respondents who said they were “not really a problem” were scored -1.0. Similarly, respondents who described problems that are more often associated with a conservative perspective as “extremely serious” were scored -1.0, those who described the same problems as “very serious” were scored -.5, and those who described those suggested problems as a “small problem” or “not really a problem” were scored +.5 and +1.0, respectively. Respondents who said they were “not sure” or refused to answer were scored 0.

Based on this scoring, respondents with very negative scores on this summary index viewed this set of suggestions about the nation’s current problems in a fashion that might lead them to respond favorably to leaders who emphasized the conservative set of problems and might respond negatively to other leaders who emphasized the opposite (more liberal) set of problems. Similarly, voters with very positive scores on this summary measure might respond positively to leaders who emphasized the liberal set of problems, and negatively to conservative leaders who emphasized an opposing agenda. The same kind of summary measure was constructed for all of the SGO96 questions which asked about the appropriateness of alternative (or potential) governmental objectives. For that summary measure, respondents who thought the government should pursue an objective that is more frequently advocated by liberal candidates were scored +1 on that objective, respondents who said the government should not pursue that objective were scored -1, and respondents who said that “it depends,” or that they weren’t sure, or refused to answer were scored 0. The opposite scoring was used

*Because the problem question that related to economic difficulty for middle-income Americans was not designed to capture policy-related conflict in the presidential campaign, it was omitted from the combined problem index described below.

for objectives that are more frequently advocated by conservative candidates. Our summary measure of liberal vs. conservative preferences concerning the appropriateness of different governmental objectives is the simple average of each respondent's answers to all 16 of the alternative objectives in that section of the instrument.

Our third and fourth summary measures were constructed to combine respondents' answers to the SGO96 questions about relative priority or emphasis. The third measure is based on the 9 questions reviewed above concerning the federal government's level of *effort* in pursuing specific objectives. For that measure, respondents who indicated that they wanted the government to put more effort into objectives that are more frequently advocated by liberal candidates were scored +1, those who indicated that less (or no) effort or money should go into those objectives were scored -1, and those who said the government should continue to put the *same* amount of effort or money into that objective were scored 0, along with those who were not sure or didn't know, or refused to answer. As with the previous summary measures for questions that were defined in terms of problem seriousness and appropriate objectives, the opposite scoring was used for objectives that are more frequently advocated by conservative candidates. The value of the resulting summary measure for each respondent was the simple average of all 9 questions about governmental effort, ranging from a theoretical minimum of -1 for any respondent who selected the more conservative response (regardless of whether it represented "more" or "less" effort) for each of these 9 questions to +1 for persons who always selected the more liberal response. In the same fashion, our fourth summary measure was constructed to combine all of each respondent's answers to the 9 SGO questions about relative priority or emphasis that were defined in terms of federal *spending* (rather than effort).

Table 11 documents the strength of the relationship between each of these four summary measures and vote choice. All entries in this table are standardized coefficients from a series of regression analyses, with and without the (progressive) introduction of statistical controls for social

Table 11**APPARENT COMBINED EFFECTS* OF POLICY-RELATED OPINIONS BY TYPE OF QUESTION****(N = 416 two-party voters)**

<u>Question Format Used for All Items</u>	<u>Standardized Bivariate Coefficient</u>	<u>With Social and Economic Char's Held Constant</u>	<u>With Party Identification Also Held Constant</u>	<u>With Other Three Batteries + Ideology Also Held Constant</u>
Problems	.46	.45	.21	(.06)
Appropriateness	.62	.60	.34	.29
Effort	.43	.40	.19	(.01)
Spending	.43	.37	.17	(.04)
<u>For Comparison:</u>				
Party Identification	.71	.68		.50
Self-Designated Ideology	.44	.40	.14	(.00)

***Coefficient appears in parentheses if the associated p value is > .1.**

and economic characteristics, partisan identification, and other major explanatory variables (including summary measures for the other three batteries).

To some observers, these results may simply document the electoral relevance of all four types of issue-related opinions, based on questions concerning the seriousness of problems, the appropriateness of objectives, and priorities defined in terms of effort and spending. In addition, however, our findings suggest that conflicts about the basic appropriateness of potential governmental objectives may be more fundamental or influential in shaping vote choice than disagreements that are defined in terms of the seriousness of alternative problems or the priority of different ongoing objectives. Put somewhat differently, these results suggest that vote choice in 1996 represented much more than a simple “match” between voters’ and the candidates’ assessment of alternative national agendas, as measured by our battery of alternative “problems.” The connections between all four types of policy-related issues and the vote are substantial, but one type appears to have a stronger independent influence. At this point, we can only speculate whether this difference should be attributed to greater causal proximity, more “decisive” content, or better measurement.

VII. THE ELECTORAL RELEVANCE OF DIFFERENT POLICY-RELATED TOPICS:

Apparent Effects of Summary Measures for Specific Issues and General Domains

The previous section’s results may be particularly relevant for researchers who design future election surveys, for they suggest the explanatory value of different aspects of alternative governmental objectives, each of which is assessed with a different type of survey question. Most electoral analysts, however, will be more interested in these different types of question because of their combined value

in assessing the electoral consequences of voters' opinions concerning specific aspects of national life. In general, electoral analysts want to know what size or magnitude of electoral "effects" should be attributed to voters' own policy-related views concerning specific topics — such as taxes, the environment, health care, racial minorities, abortion, education, aid to the disadvantaged, the federal budget deficit, homosexuality, and so forth. For each policy-related topic, we want to summarize each voter's policy-related preferences, regardless of whether those preferences are based on the seriousness of suggested problems, conflicts about the appropriateness of specific objectives, or disagreements about priority or emphasis.

To begin that kind of assessment, we have grouped all of the answers given by SGO96 respondents concerning each of the policy-related topics covered in the questionnaire, including (for each topic) any questions about specific problems, appropriateness of objectives, and preferences concerning governmental effort or spending. In particular, we have combined all of our available questions concerning policy-related preferences for each of the following topics, in order to assess their electoral relevance in 1996:

- the federal budget deficit;
- the overall level of federal taxes;
- differential tax rates for capital gains or income level;
- programs for the disadvantaged:
- programs for the retired or elderly;
- other health care issues;
- environmental protection;
- business regulation;
- education;
- military strength and defense;
- foreign peacekeeping;
- crime, including punishment, drugs, and guns;
- abortion;
- racial discrimination;
- homosexuality;
- pornography;
- school prayer; and
- legal immigration.

Table 12 summarizes the apparent electoral effects for each of these measures. Each row in that table presents a series of standardized regression coefficients, beginning with the bivariate relationship between each measure and vote choice, followed by a series of multiple regression analyses that introduce additional (cumulative) controls for, respectively, social and economic characteristics, partisan identification, and all of the other policy-related variables along with liberal vs. conservative self-designation.

From those results, it is clear that most of the policy-related topics covered by the 1996 SGO questionnaire had substantial bivariate relationships with vote choice, and several of those maintained a significant relationship (with the vote) after we controlled for social and economic characteristics *and* partisan identification. The larger potential effects from analyses with those limited controls appear to be based on voters' preferences concerning tax levels and differential rates (.13 and .11), health care (.22), the environment (.10), education (.16), defense (.10), crime (.15), abortion (.17), discrimination based on race and gender (both .13) and homosexuality (.17). However, when we add controls for all of the other variables that exhibited significant apparent effects, the coefficients for most of these specific topics are reduced to much smaller (if not insignificant) values.

For that reason, several of the explanatory variables in Table 12 concerning very specific policy issues have also been combined into a smaller number of summary measures for somewhat broader topics or domains. The apparent effects for those summary measures are presented in Table 13. From those results, it seems likely that economic issues concerning health care and other forms of assistance to the disadvantaged played a somewhat larger role in shaping individual voters' preferences than any other group of policy-related conflicts, based on a standardized coefficient of .18 after we control for social and economic characteristics, partisan identification, ideological self-designation, and the perceived state of the economy, as well as the other summary measures in this

Table 12

APPARENT EFFECTS* OF OPINIONS ABOUT SPECIFIC POLICY-RELATED TOPICS

(N = 416 two-party voters)

<u>Content of Specific Policy-related Conflicts or Topic</u>	<u>Standardized Bivariate Coefficient</u>	<u>With Social and Economic Char's Held Constant</u>	<u>With Party Identification Also Held Constant</u>	<u>With All Other Variables Also Held Constant</u>
Federal Budget Deficit	.23	.23	.08	(.02)
Overall Level of Taxes	.30	.29	.13	.07
Differential Tax Rates	.29	.26	.11	(.05)
Programs for Disadvantaged	.46	.36	.19	(.04)
Programs for Retired/Elderly	.22	.17	.08	(.01)
Other Health Care	.46	.41	.22	.14
Environmental Protection	.30	.25	.10	(-.02)
Business Regulation	.02	(.04)	(.00)	
Education	.43	.39	.16	(.02)
Defense, Military	.28	.27	.10	(.03)
Foreign Peacekeeping	.10	.12	.08	(.05)
Crime, Drugs, Guns	.33	.34	.15	(.04)
Abortion	.33	.33	.17	.11
Racial Discrimination	.34	.29	.13	(.00)
Sex Discrimination	.26	.24	.13	(.04)
Homosexuality	.43	.41	.17	(.07)
Pornography	.12	.08	(.02)	
School Prayer	.12	.15	(.05)	
Immigration	.04	.10	(.02)	
<u>For Comparison:</u>				
Party Identification	.71	.68		.50
Self-Designated Ideology	.44	.40	.14	(.01)

*Coefficient appears in parentheses if the associated p value is > .1.

Table 13

APPARENT COMBINED EFFECTS* OF BROADER POLICY-RELATED DOMAINS

(N = 416 two-party voters)

<u>General Content of Policy-related Conflicts or Topic</u>	<u>Standardized Bivariate Coefficient</u>	<u>With Social and Economic Char's Held Constant</u>	<u>With Party Identification Also Held Constant</u>	<u>With All Other Variables Also Held Constant</u>
Budget +Tax Topics	.40	.39	.17	.08
Disadvantaged+Health Care	.49	.43	.23	.18
Programs for Retired/Elderly	.22	.17	.08	(.02)
Environmental Protection	.30	.25	.10	(-.01)
Education	.43	.39	.16	(.03)
Defense+Crime/Drugs/Guns	.35	.36	.15	(.05)
Foreign Peacekeeping	.10	.12	.08	(.05)
Racial Discrimination	.34	.29	.13	(.00)
Other Social Politics (Abortion, Sex, Gender, Prayer)	.41	.43	.21	.13
<u>For Comparison:</u>				
Party Identification	.71	.68		.51
Self-Designated Ideology	.44	.40	.14	(.00)
State of the Economy	.19	.24	.14	.10

*Coefficient appears in parentheses if the associated p value is >.1.

analysis. Our combined indications of policy-related preferences concerning “social” or “moral” issues came in a close second, with a standardized coefficient of .13 in the same multivariate analysis. Preferences concerning tax levels, differential tax rates, and the federal deficit — i.e., fiscal policy — exhibited a smaller standardized coefficient (.08) in this summary analysis, and all of the other coefficients failed to pass our threshold for statistical significance. For purposes of comparison, we note that the standardized coefficients in the same area for partisan identification, ideological self-designation, and perceptions of the economy are, respectively, .51, .00, and .10.

VIII. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Unresolved Issues for Continuing Analysis and Future Survey Designs

At this point, all analyses of data from the 1996 Survey of Governmental Objectives are in a fairly early stage, and little communication has taken place between the different organizations and individuals involved. The above preliminary results are designed to provide background information for other analyses to be carried out during the rest of 1997, and to initiate discussions concerning future utilization of these types of questions. Even at this early stage, however, some suggestions or conclusions seem appropriate, for they are unlikely to depend on the outcome of subsequent analyses. The next four sections present recommendations for additional analyses that should take place in the near future, and the last two sections discuss ways in which this approach to measurement might be used in future national surveys.

Measurement Revision for Electoral Explanation. The preliminary analyses reported above do not include controls for all of the social and economic indicators suggested by parallel analyses

reported in *The New American Voter* (e.g., the religion measure is not as refined), and they do not reflect any item selection procedures that would improve our measures of voters' preferences concerning specific policy conflicts. Furthermore, the above results concerning the combined electoral effects of voters' preferences in broad policy-related domains should be compared with parallel results from a variety of different classifications. For all these reasons, the above results should be seen as suggestive instead of definitive.

Assessing the Electoral "Importance" of Different Explanatory Variables. The preceding discussion of the apparent relevance of different policy-related topics was entirely based on standardized coefficients. Such coefficients may be used to compare different topics or domains in terms of their overall role in explaining individual differences in vote choice, but they provide no information about the role of each topic in producing the aggregate result of the election. As emphasized repeatedly in *The New American Voter*, many analysts of a given election will be primarily interested in comparing the apparent role or "importance" of different issues (or groups of issues) in producing the winner's victory. Thus, analysts of the 1996 election will want to assess the positive (or negative) contributions that voters' attitudes toward specific topic made to Bill Clinton's margin of victory over Bob Dole. Because of the distributions of voter sentiment concerning the variables we have reviewed, some of those issues almost certainly helped Clinton, while others produced some advantage for Dole. As is likely to be the case with other SGO96 participants, some of our continuing analyses will be devoted to these explicitly outcome-oriented questions.

Undetected Variation in the Magnitude of Specific Policy-related Effects. Most of our evidence concerning the specific policy-related attitudes that appeared to have a larger (instead of a smaller) impact on vote choice is based on analyses that include many different kinds of voters — including subsets that may have been influenced by quite different combinations of factors. The size

of our 1996 pilot survey will discourage some ways of exploring the possibility of “conditional effects, but we intend to examine potential differences of that sort concerning the extent to which voters report they “cared” about different topics, and their level of attention or exposure to the 1996 campaign.

Major Candidates’ Positions on Specific Policy-related Issues. A major advantage of the SGO96 batteries is their ability to cover a substantial number of questions about different governmental objectives with a common frame of reference or perspective. The same approach can also be used to obtain respondents’ perceptions of the “positions” of each major candidate with the same response categories that have been used to obtain the respondents’ own views. To test that possibility, the 1996 SGO asked half of all respondents to describe Bob Dole’s and Bill Clinton’s positions concerning governmental effort, and the other (randomly selected) half of the sample was asked to “place” both candidates concerning their positions on federal spending. Several participants are interested in this approach to candidate “placements,” but analysis of these materials is in a very early stage.

Utilization of SGO Batteries in Future Surveys. From our point of view, the best way to analyze future presidential elections in terms of alternative governmental objectives would be for the American National Election Studies to adopt most (if not all) of the SGO96 batteries concerning perceptions of conditions, seriousness of problems, appropriateness of objectives, and relative priority in terms of effort, in addition to the continuing ANES battery concerning federal spending. Such a change may eventually be made in the ANES interview schedule, but it would require very difficult choices. The SGO batteries require a substantial amount of interview time, and the new questions involved must compete with a large number of continuing questions that serve many different analytic purposes — including questions that have been asked every two or four years for several elections, including some with an unbroken time series since the 1950's.

In recent years, we have submitted a series of recommendations to the ANES Board of

Overseers concerning the desirability of comprehensive batteries of questions like those discussed in

this paper. We understand that these recommendations for change have been difficult to accept,

because crucial analyses require that the new questions about each topic be asked of (at least)

substantial subsets of the same respondents who answer the established or traditional questions about

“issues.” For those reasons, we believe that more experience with these batteries will be needed before

they can be adopted for the full range of potential governmental objectives in future ANES surveys.

Alternative Strategies and Designs. In addition to their potential utilization in future ANES

surveys, these kinds of questions should be more useful for a variety of analytic purposes if they were

administered frequently over time, and if respondents from earlier points in time were re-interviewed

after the subsequent election. For that reason, we are discussing the possibility of a future version of

SGO that would return to the kind of continuous monitoring that has been used by both the American

and the Canadian National Elections Studies. Post-election re-interviewing with many respondents

who had answered questions about alternative objectives many months before the campaign would

provide direct evidence concerning the degree to which apparent effects based on more proximate pre-

election interviews are subject to persuasion effects or other forms of “endogeneity bias.”

Concluding Observations. We believe that electoral analysts need to know which potential

governmental objectives have played some role in shaping voters’ evaluations of the major candidates

before any given election — and which potential objectives did not. Most of the substantive issues

in any election are defined in terms of governmental objectives that have been advocated or

emphasized by at least one of the major candidates. As we see it, the best way to understand which

of those issues play some role in shaping voter’s choices is to ask survey respondents a comprehensive

set of questions about the explicit or implicit objectives involved — each of which may be defined

in terms of current conditions, potential problems, appropriateness of governmental responsibility, or relative priorities. In short, we see no satisfactory alternative *other than* trying to describe that comprehensive set of voters' opinions by adopting a design that will provide a "survey" of alternative or potential governmental objectives in addition to a random sample of the American electorate. We look forward to discussing alternatives with researchers who advocate a different approach, and to identifying those who share our interest in a comprehensive set of questions about current or projected objectives.

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