

Association News

Philip E. Converse: An Intellectual History of the APSA President

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Philip E. Converse, 1983-84 president of the Association, is one of the leading survey researchers in the social sciences. His work has given political science a much better understanding of the social-psychological basis of public attitudes toward politics.

Beginnings

Phil Converse grew up in New England, but has been associated with the Midwest since his undergraduate years at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. At Denison, he majored in English literature, with much additional work in comparative literature. Also it was at Denison that he met his wife Jean. After graduating from Denison, he entered the creative writing program of the State University of Iowa and obtained a master's degree in English literature. That was followed by army service in the Chicago area and the many years since then in Michigan.



APSA President Philip Converse chats at the annual meeting with Program Chairs Ada Finifter (1982) of Michigan State University and Doris Graber (1984) of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Women's Caucus President Marian L. Palley of the University of Delaware.



Program Chair Herbert Weisberg of Ohio State University presides over the awards ceremony at the first plenary session of the 1983 annual meeting.

Phil's interests began to shift from the world of literature and creative writing to research and social science during those years in Iowa and Chicago. His enjoyment of research and fascination with the analysis of data first became evident at the State University of Iowa while translating a 13th century French book to compare it with Chaucer's translation of the same book. While in the army, he had time for reading history and soon realized he was interested in social science.

His association with Ann Arbor began virtually accidentally in the last few months of his army service when he was stationed in Battle Creek, Michigan. Jean went to the University of Michigan in the fall of 1952 to work on her teaching credits. Soon she was helping with the campus Adlai Stevenson campaign which was centered around the social psychology program there. As a result,

Phil met the people in the program and realized it was one of the top social psychology programs in the country. Attending a speech at the Michigan Union given by Warren Miller on the 1952 election survey, Phil was intrigued with this approach to politics, asking Miller afterwards if they had given any thought to reinterviewing the same respondents over time. Miller, pleased to find someone with writing skills interested in the area, encouraged him to pursue graduate work in the field.

After the army service ended, the Converses followed through with their plans for a year in Europe, with Phil studying at the University of Paris. Returning to Ann Arbor, Phil took a master's degree in sociology as a prelude to pursuing a doctorate there in social psychology. The leaders in the social psychology program at the time were Ted Newcomb and Dan Katz, along with Helen Peak, Doc Cartwright, Jack French, Al Zander, and, of course, Angus Campbell. The program was an ideal training ground from which Converse could move in any direction in the social sciences.

At that time the social psychology program was a pipeline to the Institute for Social Research (which still had little connection with the political science department). As a result, when Converse interviewed in 1956 with Angus Campbell for a research job (Warren Miller was away at Berkeley that year), he soon found himself assistant study director on the 1956 election study. Phil was responsible, among other duties, for developing new questions on the influence of social groups on the vote. The results became the core of his dissertation.

After the 1956 election study was completed, Warren Miller insisted that it was important to prepare a book length report on the 1950s election surveys. Angus Campbell's initial misgivings were overcome, and soon Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Don Stokes were meeting weekly, going over their draft chapters. Recall that this was the era before computers were used by social scientists, so the analysis was done primarily by counter sorter. Phil's dissertation analysis of social group influence was reflected in *The American Voter*, along

with his work on the ideological level of conceptualization of the electorate.

Phil returned to France on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1959-60 at which point he began a collaboration with George Depeux on French politics. His teaching in the sociology department at Michigan began in 1960. *The American Voter* was published that year and truly revolutionized the study of elections. In 1963 Phil was appointed associate professor of political science at Michigan.

His writings since then reflect the variety of interests which were already evident in his early work. There is a focus on the social psychology of political behavior generally and, more specifically, the understanding of voting behavior, often set within the framework of his cross-cultural interests. At the same time, there is the development and use of sophisticated analysis methods, not for methodological effect but always to answer important substantive questions.

The Social Psychology of Political Behavior

Converse's contributions to social psychology began with his earliest writings. In the 1960s, for example, he collaborated with Newcomb and Turner on the text *Social Psychology: The Study of Human Interactions*. His research articles applied social psychology to political behavior, showing a concern with understanding cognitive processes, such as the effects of information on political decision-making and how multiple dimensions underlie political attitudes. Thus, the relationship between media intake and party defection was shown to be curvilinear, with highest defection rates for those with the most information and those few with no media input, in "Information Flow and the Stability of Partisan Attitudes" (1962). "The Problem of Party Distances in Models of Voting Change" (1966) was not only the first study to apply a multidimensional model to partisan competition (here in France and Finland) but showed how different sets of voters could place different emphases on the different dimensions.

But his major work of this genre is undoubtedly his classic chapter on "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). To avoid the confusion of the multiple meanings of the term "ideology," the concepts of belief system, centrality of an idea-element, and constraint of idea-elements are introduced. He shows the severe limits to the public's recognition and understanding of the terms "conservatism" and "liberalism," and shows how this relates to the level of conceptualization of the electorate. The constraint is shown to be higher among an elite sample of congressional candidates than among the mass public and is shown to be higher when the object is a social grouping of high centrality. The stability of belief elements over time is explored. He finds greatest stability for partisanship and low over-time stability for issues with low centrality, and explains this result in terms of a "black-and-white" model in which some respondents have perfectly stable attitudes while others change randomly but without any meaningful change over time. The overall direction of this work is to discount the ideological level of the electorate, but at the end Converse introduces the concept of issue publics to allow for the deep concern that particular sets of citizens have about particular issues. This tour de force concludes with a discussion of the relationship between elites with distinctive ideologies and the mass public, with case studies of the abolition movement and the formation of the Republican party and the mass base of the Nazi party. This chapter has set the terms for most of our subsequent understanding and analysis of the ideological level of the public.

Additionally, the social psychologist's concern with discovering common psychological processes underlying apparently discrepant human behavior is evident in his comparative work. Converse repeatedly demonstrates how common processes can account for partisan patterns across countries even where there are superficial differences. For example, in "The Politicization of the Electorate in France and the United States" (1962) Converse and George Depeux show how apparent differences

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in levels of partisanship in two countries were consistent with similar transmission rates across generations. His later study "Of Time and Partisan Stability" (1969) shows how levels of partisanship across five nations are consistent with a single model of partisan learning, resistance, transmission, and forgetting.

The Voting Studies

Converse has also been central to the Michigan election studies. His contributions to *Elections and the Political Order* (1966) included introducing "The Concept of a Normal Vote" and applying it to determine the importance of the religious factor in the 1960 election. "Electoral Myth and Reality" (1965) demonstrated how Goldwater could have lost so decisively in 1964 when Republican elites perceived substantial support for his conservative positions. In "Continuity and Change in American Politics" (1969) he helped account for the effects of the Wallace candidacy on the 1968 campaign. Other work in the 1960s compared the support of de Gaulle and Eisenhower, examined nonvoting among

young adults, and considered the possibilities of realignment in the South.

His analysis is critical to our conventional understanding of the workings of ideology, party identification, and issue factors in affecting voting. The ideological level of the electorate is shown by Converse to be limited. Partisanship is instead the major long-term influence on the vote decision. The normal vote represents the long-term partisan baseline. Partisanship is seen as stable, but with an increase in strength associated with the life cycle. Issues have a limited role in elections, because different voters focus on different issues. But all of this is embedded in a rich theory with a deep understanding of political dynamics that critics often miss when they focus on the bareboned outline without rereading the original sources.

Three major works now summarize Converse's research on voting behavior and public opinion. First, his chapter on "Change in the American Electorate" (in *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, 1972) takes an historical look at voting trends, using Jerrold G. Rusk's analysis and Converse's own thinking, to counter

REGISTRY OF RETIRED PROFESSORS

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Walter Dean Burnham's claims about the weakening of the electorate after the 1890s and then turning to more recent changes, including the politicization of southern blacks, partisan change in the South, and the erosion of partisan fidelity, and finally reflecting on the role of education in the upgrading of the electorate. His report on "Public Opinion and Voting Behavior" in the *Handbook of Political Science* (1975) is a massive summary statement of his views on the state of the knowledge in these fields. Additionally, his reports with Greg Markus on the 1972-74-76 panel study in the 1979 *American Political Science Review* reexamine the overtime stability of survey questions and develop a comprehensive dynamic simultaneous-equation model of the vote.

Converse has studied voting behavior not only in the United States, but has also been active in extending the use of survey research cross-nationally. In addition to major work on France and Canada, he has been important in helping to develop a survey research community in Brazil. And he has joined Henry Valen in applying scaling models to explore dimensions of party cleavage in Norway.

Methodology

Converse was one of the first to recognize the value of panel studies for understanding political behavior. He was not content with just tracing change across time, but instead examined the change patterns. His first analysis of panel data was of the 1956-58-60 U.S. election panel. He has continued that focus with his analysis of the 1972-74-76 U.S. panel study and a study of political representation in France that includes panel data collected before and after the May-June upheaval of 1968 that was the largest post-war revolt in Western Europe. He has used the panel data to demonstrate the real limitations of the public's focus on political issues.

He brings to the analysis of survey data an unusual appreciation of their frailty. His own interviewing experiences make

him constantly aware of the true limitations of the data, a recognition which is missing for many of the younger generation of analysts of public opinion data. This understanding of the limits of the data is emphasized in "Attitudes and Nonattitudes" (1963) where he developed the concept of a "nonattitude" to account for a pattern of cross-time issue correlations in the 1950s panel study which did not fit an orderly (Markov) change process. Howard Schuman and Converse later applied this understanding of the limits of public opinion data to misconceptions of the polling on popular support for the war effort in "Silent Majorities and the Vietnam War" (1970).

His writings are unusual in combining an interest in modelling with his statistical analysis. He can enjoy developing a model which can predict well with minimal concern for the internal dynamics of the black box (as in his predictions of the performance of athletic teams), but more often his research is devoted to seeking process models which are consistent with observed data (as in the study of cross-national differences in strength of partisanship and in the study of attitude change between panel waves).

Converse's impact has been considerable not only in research but in the teaching of methodology. He has taught in the summer program of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research since its inception, introducing countless social scientists to quantitative methods generally and panel analysis more specifically. His instructional style is not that of the methodologist trying to impress students with his mathematical skills, but rather that of the substantive scholar who uses statistical techniques when they are necessary. Indeed that trait is visible in his research, where he does not run out to be the first to apply the newest techniques but instead feels free to develop new models to help address his substantive concerns—such as the black-and-white model for analysis of panel data and taking differences in individual emphasis on dimensions into account years before the mathematical psychologists formalized similar thinking in their individual differences scaling model.

Converse's Contributions

Converse's several books in the 1970s exhibit the unusual breadth of his interests. *Vietnam and the Silent Majority: The Dove's Guide* with Rosenberg and Verba further examines the meaning and limits of survey data on the war. *The Human Meaning of Social Change*, edited with Angus Campbell, *The Use of Time*, and *The Quality of American Life* reflect some of his sociological interests. *The Dynamics of Party Support* documents age effects on strength of partisanship. The *American Social Attitudes Data Sourcebook* with Dotson, Hoag, and McGee compiles data from the Michigan election studies of the 1950s to 1970s on a variety of sociological topics.

The importance of Converse's work is reflected in many ways. It has been seminal to a large number of further studies by other scholars. It brought social psychological concepts into the study of political attitudes. It has provoked controversy, as witnessed by the exchanges between Converse and critics in the pages of several journals. And it makes Converse the most cited author in the thousands of citations in the APSA book on *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*.

Phil had always enjoyed research more than administration, but with Warren Miller's departure from Michigan, Phil took over the directorship of the Center for Political Studies in 1982. But his research continues. He and Roy Pierce are completing their book-length manuscript on political representation in France. Phil also continues to work with Duane Alwin on research on the quality of life. And inevitably he will return to American electoral studies.

At this time, Philip E. Converse is Robert Cooley Angell Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Michigan, Director of the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research, and Associate Director of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, as well as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the

American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has received Doctor of Humane Letters degrees at his alma mater Denison University and at the University of Chicago. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences where he is now on the Board of Trustees. He is also on the Board of Trustees of the Russell Sage Foundation. He has been President of the International Society of Political Psychology and is now President of the American Political Science Association.

By reminding survey research in political science of its social psychology underpinnings, Converse's work has helped the study of political behavior to become more scientific. At the same time his enjoyment of research has served as an example to both colleagues and students.

Finally, it is difficult to summarize the human qualities of this very private man. He is long in accomplishments, but has a practical, self-deprecating personal style that makes him easy to talk to. He is very much liked personally by the many who know him. He is a hard worker, long ago becoming a legend at the Institute for Social Research for coming in to work late at night, signing out in the check-in book at the door at the same time he signs in so that he could have some undisturbed work time with no one knowing he is behind his office door. He has played an important role on the dissertation committees of countless students, both by way of supervision and by way of inspiration and support. As a token of the respect that he inspires among students, nine students on whose committees he served in the late 1970s formed "Converse's All Stars baseball team." He was playing a significant role in each of their committees, sometimes by prodding on to completion those perfectionists who seemed unable to finish their dissertations. The team equipped themselves with appropriate jerseys and caps, designating Converse as their manager. As they finished their dissertations and received the Ph.D.s, their numbers were officially retired at a ceremony when they gave their jerseys to the club manager. □