The Discriminability and Dimensionality of Political Support:

Some Results from a German Pilot Study

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The conceptualization of political support has generally involved an idiom suggesting the possibility of continuous measurement (support is said to "increase" or "decrease", and to be able to assume "positive" or "negative" values) and a number of broad types or dimensions (e.g. "specific" and "diffuse").[1] The degree to which these conceptualizations fit the way citizens express their support for political objects can be investigated by the administration of various support-relevant stimuli to a set of respondents and the analysis of the interrelationships among their responses.

This was one purpose of a pilot study conducted in three West German communities in October, 1973, using an instrument designed by Edward N. Muller III and the author. A total of 259 persons were interviewed, 90 in a fairly conservative village, 90 in a fairly left-wing working class district of an industrial city, and 79 in a university noted for its radical left-wing student activity. The discussion below will focus first on the question of discriminability or continuity, and then on dimensionality.

The continuity of support. To say that political support is continuous, i.e. that it can range up and down with infinite fineness, may be interpreted in either of two ways. The weak interpretation would be that supportive behavior, even if discrete, can profitably be analyzed using the interval level of measurement. In this perspective, the social scientist might be able to come up with a justification for assigning relative numerical values to such acts as draft-card burning, volunteering for military service, and voting for the chief opposition party. The strong interpretation of the continuity thesis would be that support is not only analyzable with continuous measurement, but is also perceived and expressed continuously by citizens themselves.

To see whether our respondents could perceive support continuously, we asked them to evaluate on a continuous scale the amount of approval or disapproval for the German Bundestag shown by each of 19 statements. The scale in each case ranged from -50 to +50. The lower end, -50, was defined as meaning "so bad that it could not possibly be worse", and the upper end, +50, was defined as "so good that it could not possibly be better". The midpoint, zero, was defined as "partly good and partly bad". Every fifth point on the scale was numbered and cross-hatched. The 19 statements that were to be translated into numerical values on this scale mostly took the form, "Der Bundestag ist . . . ." The

complete list of statements is given in Table 1. The

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

19 sentences were selected with the assistance of German informants to cover the normal range of positive and negative evaluation, while avoiding terms that were descriptive as well as evaluative. In order to make the task of numerical translation easier for the respondents, the 19 ratings were performed on 19 labeled scales printed on the same sheet, and respondents were allowed to change their preliminary ratings after having a chance to compare them with each other. This was accomplished by the use of a device, called an "Opinionometer", containing a bank of 20 pointers that can be moved up and down their respective scales and need not be activated to make permanent marks on the scale sheet until the respondent has completed any readjustment of his batch of ratings.

In spite of the opportunity for inter-item comparison given to the respondents, the goal of obtaining consensual numerical translations of the 19 statements was for the most part not achieved. The standard deviations of the ratings ranged from 18 to 35 and averaged close to the standard deviation of the respondents' own numerically expressed opinion of the Bundestag. This contradicts our expectations. We

Table 1

Statements about the Bundestag

1. Der Bundestag ist schrecklich.
2. Der Bundestag is wunderbar.
3. Der Bundestag bringt nichts.
4. Der Bundestag ist meistens gut.
5. Der Bundestag ist sehr schlecht.
6. Der Bundestag ist phantastisch.
7. Der Bundestag ist meistens schlecht.
8. Der Bundestag ist so-la-la.
9. Der Bundestag ist wirklich großartig.
10. Der Bundestag ist zum Teil gut.
11. Der Bundestag ist fürchterlich.
12. Der Bundestag sollte in Ehren gehalten werden.
13. Der Bundestag sollte abgeschafft werden.
14. Der Bundestag ist große Klasse.
15. Der Bundestag ist zum Teil schlecht.
16. Der Bundestag ist sehr gut.
17. Der Bundestag ist ziemlich schlecht.
18. Der Bundestag ist in Ordnung.
19. Der Bundestag ist ziemlich gut.

may be apparent rather than real, and that better measurement might have given different results. When the ratings of two very similar and highly positive statements are plotted against each other, as in Figure 1, the expected pattern is a bunching of all responses in the upper right corner. Instead, we see that the relationship is fairly strong but linear, with a sizeable number of respondents rating both items oppositely to the way we had expected. This suggests that respondents were

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

mostly internally consistent, but that many of them misunderstood their task. The most likely error appears to be a confusion between providing the opinion that the item expresses and providing the opinion that the respondent has about the opinion that the item expresses. The former cognitive task appears to be logically simpler, but is less common in opinion surveys and in fact was the first such task in this pilot study, coming at the end of a 1.5 to 2-hour battery of questions which almost invariably asked for the respondent's own opinion. Interviewers generally reported that respondents were confused and even angered by this set of items. This

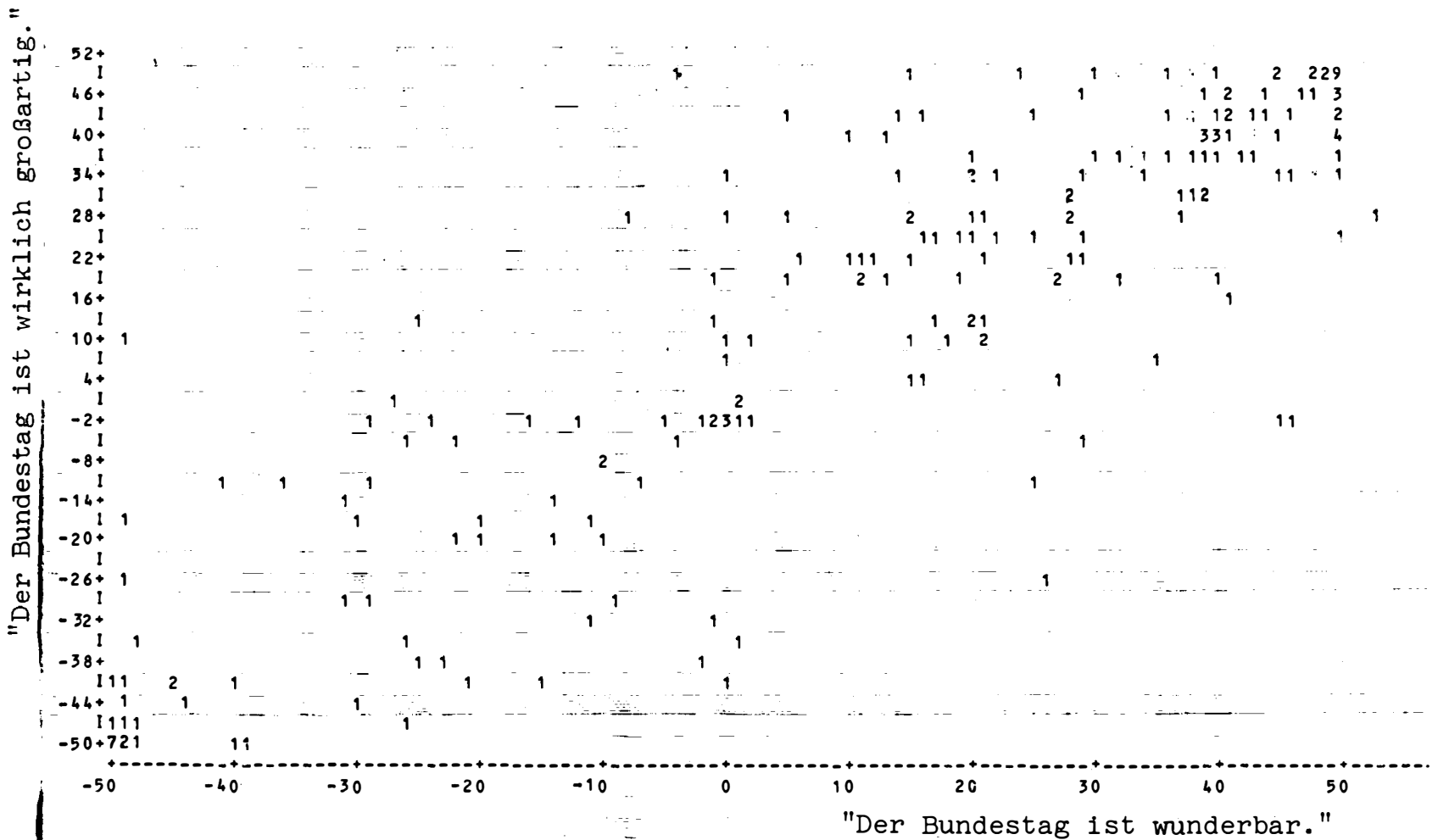

Figure 1--Interpretations of Two Positive Statements about the Bundestag

reaction, if due to more than the length of the interview, may partly explain the diversity of responses obtained here. In addition, the hypothesis is suggested that respondents will find it more difficult to move between the above-described cognitive and evaluative rating modes for the same object than among different objects within the same rating mode.

If the respondents who rated the supposedly positive statements negatively did so because of confusion as to the rating mode, then we should find that those were respondents who had negative opinions about the Bundestag. Positive statements would be rated negatively by them if they misperceived their task as evaluating the statements instead of numerically translating them. Those with positive opinions about the Bundestag, however, would give positive ratings to positive statements, regardless of whether they had the right or the wrong understanding of their task. This explanation is supported by the fact that almost all those who gave negative interpretations to highly positive statements had themselves negative or only slightly positive opinions of the Bundestag. Figure 2, for example, contains the same plot as Figure 1 but is limited to those who rated their own opinion of the Bundestag above 27 on the scale.[2]

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The explanation based on misunderstanding of the task is further supported by examination of educational differences. More highly educated respondents could be

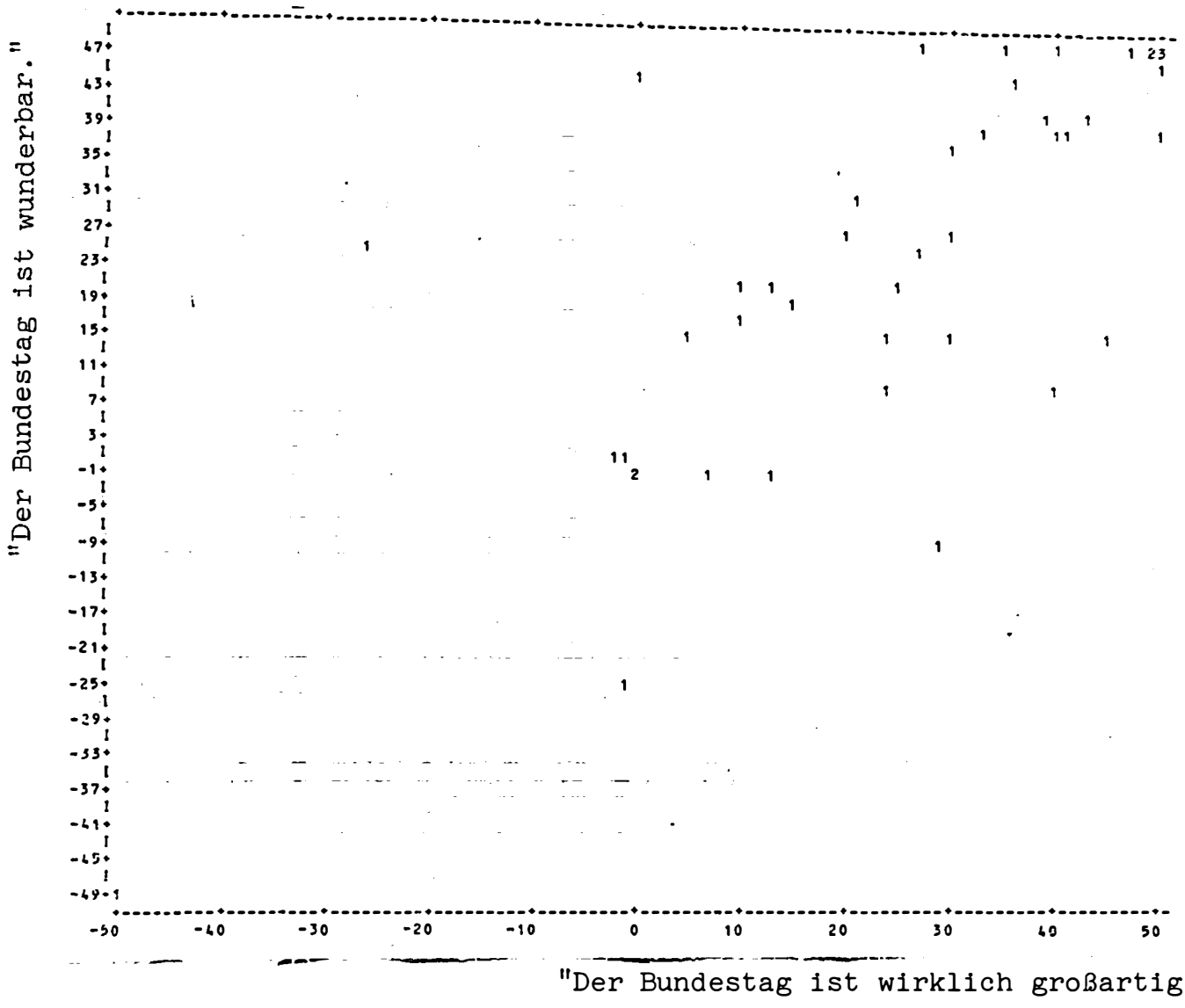

Figure 2--Interpretations of Two Positive Statements about the Bundestag by Respondents with Highly Positive Opinions of the Bundestag

expected to understand the task and to make the inter-modal transition more easily than less educated ones. This appears to have been the case. Those with at least the Abitur (Gymnasium diploma) had a lower opinion of the Bundestag than those without the Abitur, on the average; so if the same proportion of each educational group misunderstood the task, the more educated group would be expected to evaluate the positive statements more negatively than the less educated group. But on the contrary, the highest median rating given by the more educated group to any statement was 45, as opposed to only 25 given by the less educated group. This difference could be accounted for by the assumption that the more educated respondents were less likely to misunderstand the task. Since those with negative opinions about the Bundestag would be liable to make the mirror image of the above mistake with negative statements, it is not surprising that the corresponding pattern is found for these statements as well. The lowest median rating given by the less educated group was -31, compared with -50 given by the more educated group.[3]

Still another result pointing to the same conclusion is the response to the first item, a highly negative one on which (because it was the first) the task was explained in more detail than on any of the other items. Those with less education gave this statement the most negative mean rating of all statements, while those

with more education ranked three other statements more negatively than it. These three items, it would appear, were given mistakenly positive ratings by some less educated respondents who would have avoided this mistake if these items had been explained in the same detail as the first one. While some educated respondents may have done the same, we can assume that they were less likely to do so.

For simplicity, the respondents have been divided above into a more and a less educated group. But more thorough analysis reveals a somewhat curvilinear relationship between education and response behavior. The extreme groups are those without the Abitur and those with only the Abitur. Respondents with additional university education, whether complete or incomplete, are between the former two groups in most respects. This may in part result from the wording of the education question, such that those who were currently students in a university gave their last diploma as the Abitur, while those who had discontinued their education while in a university gave "incomplete university study" as their last educational achievement. In any case, the median opinion of the Bundestag among those with just the Abitur was -8, as contrasted with 15 for those with university study and 17 for those without the Abitur. In some ways, those with just the Abitur behave like the most educated group of all. For example, on the Bundestag opinion question, the

nonresponse rate was 18% for those without the Abitur, 11% for those with university education, and 0% for those with just the Abitur.

Respondents in the pilot study were asked for numerical ratings not only of supportive and oppositional statements, as those above, but also of 12 supportive and oppositional behaviors. In principle it would have been possible to ask for the same kind of response to a set of behavioral descriptions, and this was originally planned. Discussions with our German informants, however, revealed no agreeable formulation for the dimension on which ratings were to be requested. Whatever words were proposed to ask respondents to rate actions as to their supportiveness, deviance, or extremity, informants rejected them as being ambiguous or unfamiliar. Therefore we tried a more concrete rating idea: respondents were asked to estimate what percentage of all West German citizens approved of each action. The smaller the percentage perceived as approving, the more extreme the action would be postulated as being.

The evidence at hand appears to confirm that our respondents' perceptions of their fellow citizens' approval rates were reasonably accurate. Figure 3 shows the median of the perceived approval percentage for each action, together with the <u>actual</u> percentage of the

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

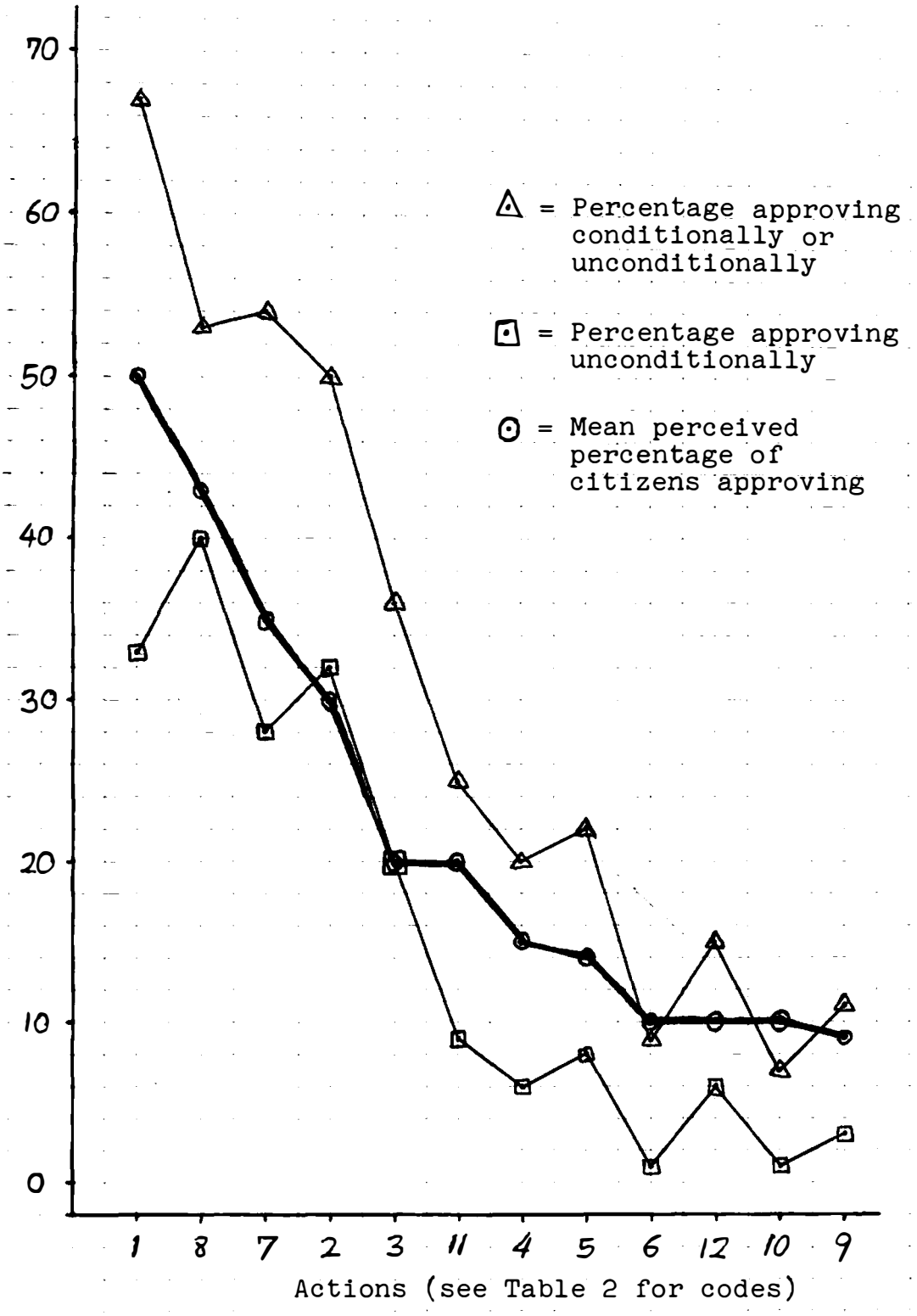

Figure 3--Perceived and Actual Rates of Approval of Supportive and Oppositional Actions

respondents approving the action. Two different definitions of actual approval are given: with and without counting responses that "it would depend on the situation" as constituting approval. In general, the perceived approval curve falls between the two actual approval curves. At the lower end, where the actions are more extreme, the perceived curve comes close to coinciding with the more liberal actual curve, a pattern that fits the assumption that many approving respondents who say "it would depend" in regard to extreme actions are choosing a safe way to express their approval.

This pleasing result does need to be qualified, however. It is hard to believe that 9% of all West Germans favor overthrowing the government by force. At the extreme end of the range, the respondents' perceptions of approval appear to be inflated, and the fact that their own approval (including conditional approval) is actually about as high as their mean estimate can be traced to the presence of an unrepresentatively large number of university students in the sample, which was drawn precisely to overrepresent oppositional attitudes. Actual approval rates on some items vary greatly among the educational groups. While 10% of those without the Abitur approve of refusing military service, for example, 38% of those with at least the Abitur do. Even more surprising is the persistence of this difference at the conventional end of the range: while 61% of those with at least the Abitur approve of petition drives, only

17% of those without the Abitur do so. This suggests the existence of very different political subcultures, defined largely by education, in West Germany, and calls into question the exclusive use of individualistic variables for the prediction of supportive and oppositional opinions. This result further raises the question as to how isolated these subcultures are, and hence how accurate the perceptions of subculture members are concerning the distribution of opinions in the population at large. If the perceived and actual curves in Figure 3 are similar, perhaps this is due to the phenomenon that members of each subculture generalize to the population from their own group, combined with the fact that both types of data in the Figure are taken from the same sample. Further analysis will enable us to test this guess.

From these results of the pilot study we can draw some tentative conclusions about the perception of support as continuous. This perception appears to be weak enough that it can be reliably expressed only under conducive conditions: absence of alternation among rating modes, adequately detailed explanation and practice, a high educational level, or some combination of these conditions. In addition, the use of items that are highly plausible could be expected to be another conducive condition; several informants stated after the pilot study had been carried out that some Bundestag items were

not realistic. Given the unconducive conditions now known to have characterized the pilot study, and the fairly satisfactory results obtained when these conditions could be analytically corrected, there is reason to explore further the possibility of eliciting continuous perceptions of support variables. This should be done in the light of the experiences of other investigators working in the United States with more refined techniques.[4]

The dimensionality of support. The less sophisticated the citizenry is, the fewer empirical dimensions political support will have. Unsophisticated thinking will lead citizens to react similarly to the various political objects, to the various aspects of each object, and in the various modes available for reaction. If one political object is seen as good, all will be; if an object is seen as good, it will also be seen as fair, legitimate, intelligent, hard-working, and so on; and if an object is seen as good, it will also be liked, verbally defended, fought for, voted for, consulted, etc. Contrarily, sophisticated thinking will cause distinctions to be made among objects ("I respect the Congress, but not the President"), among their aspects ("Socialism as an ideology is the best, but the way it is being put into practice here is terrible"), and among the available modes of reaction to them ("Let's give him lip service, but otherwise bypass him in our decision-making").

These considerations should suffice to make us aware that the dimensionality of support is likely to be contingent rather than universal, and that the conditions which determine it will vary not only from one polity to another, but also among individuals in the same polity.

For a glance at the dimensionality of support in our West German sample, let us look first at some opinions about the qualities of five political objects. Respondents were asked three times to react to each object using the Opinionometer. They were asked to rate each object's trustworthiness, fairness, and quality of work. The questions were clustered in the interview by characteristics rather than by object: first the trustworthiness questions, then the fairness questions, and finally the quality-of-work questions. Within each cluster the objects were ordered the same: police, judges, administrative officials, Bundestag members, and civil servants. All questions were contained on the same Opinionometer sheet so as to minimize order effects. If any artificial consistency were to show up, however, we would have to expect it to be consistency among all the objects on a given characteristic, since these are the questions that were adjacent. It is therefore interesting that there was more consistency in the other direction instead. As Figure 4 shows, the three ratings

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

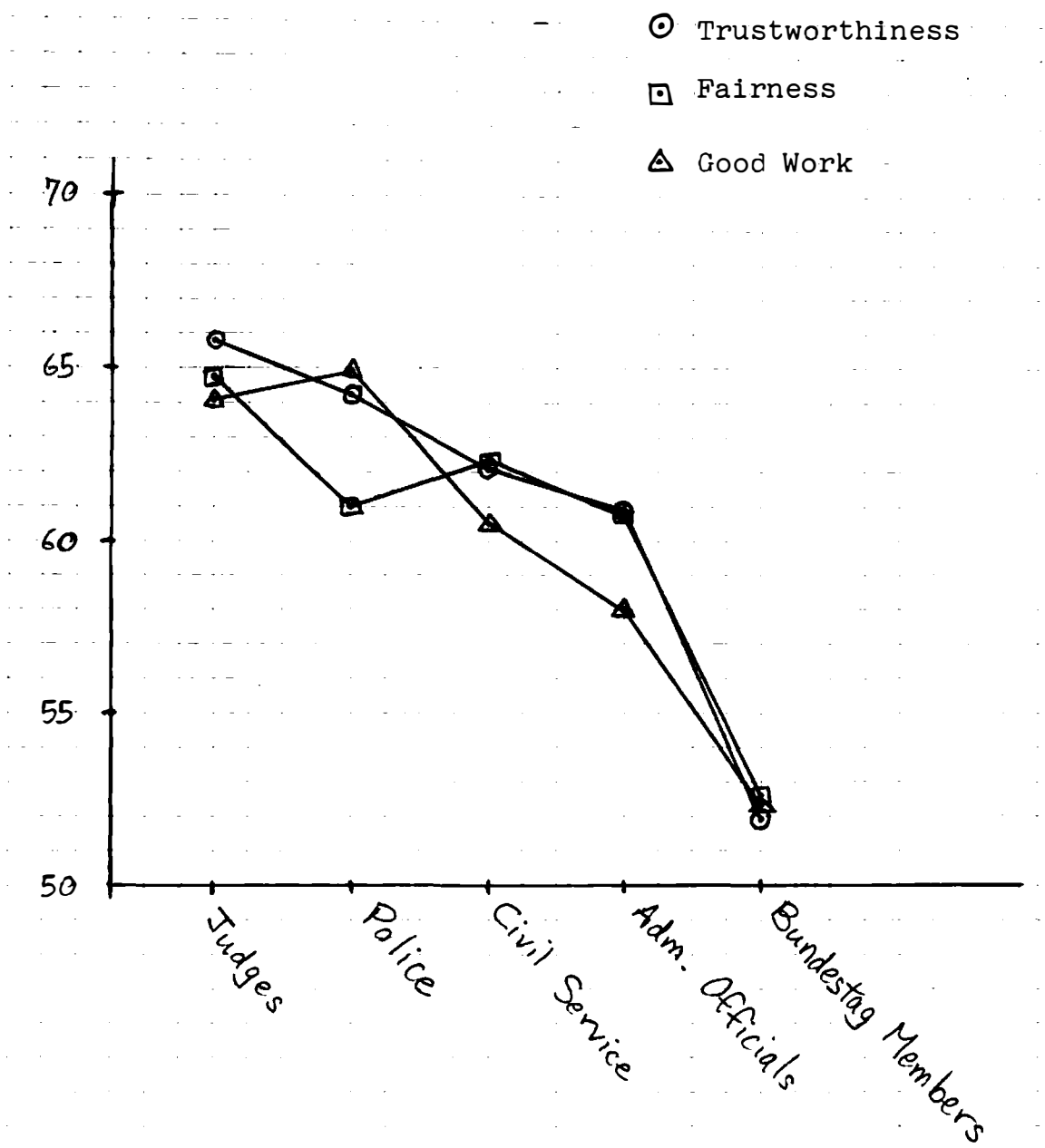

Figure 4--Mean Ratings Given to Five Political Objects on Three Characteristics

for each object were closer than the five ratings on any one characteristic. Respondents, as a group, seem to have differentiated more among political objects than among their aspects. Secondarily, they seem to differentiate among aspects somewhat more for those objects that are closer to their personal experience. The greatest differentiation is for the police, and the least for members of the Bundestag. Since the main result could be due to the canceling out of oppositely directed differentiations by different respondents, it is worth looking at Figure 5 to confirm that the similarity of ratings of the same object on different characteristics is in fact an individual tendency, not just a collective one.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Even though the three mean ratings for Bundestag members are very close, this does not by itself mean that the respondents' views were ill-considered. To get evidence on this point we can compare their responses on these items with their answers to the general opinion question about the Bundestag, elicited considerably later in the interview with the use of the zero-midpoint scale described earlier. It appears from an elementary analysis that the opinions of the less educated were indeed ill-considered, at least in comparison with those of the

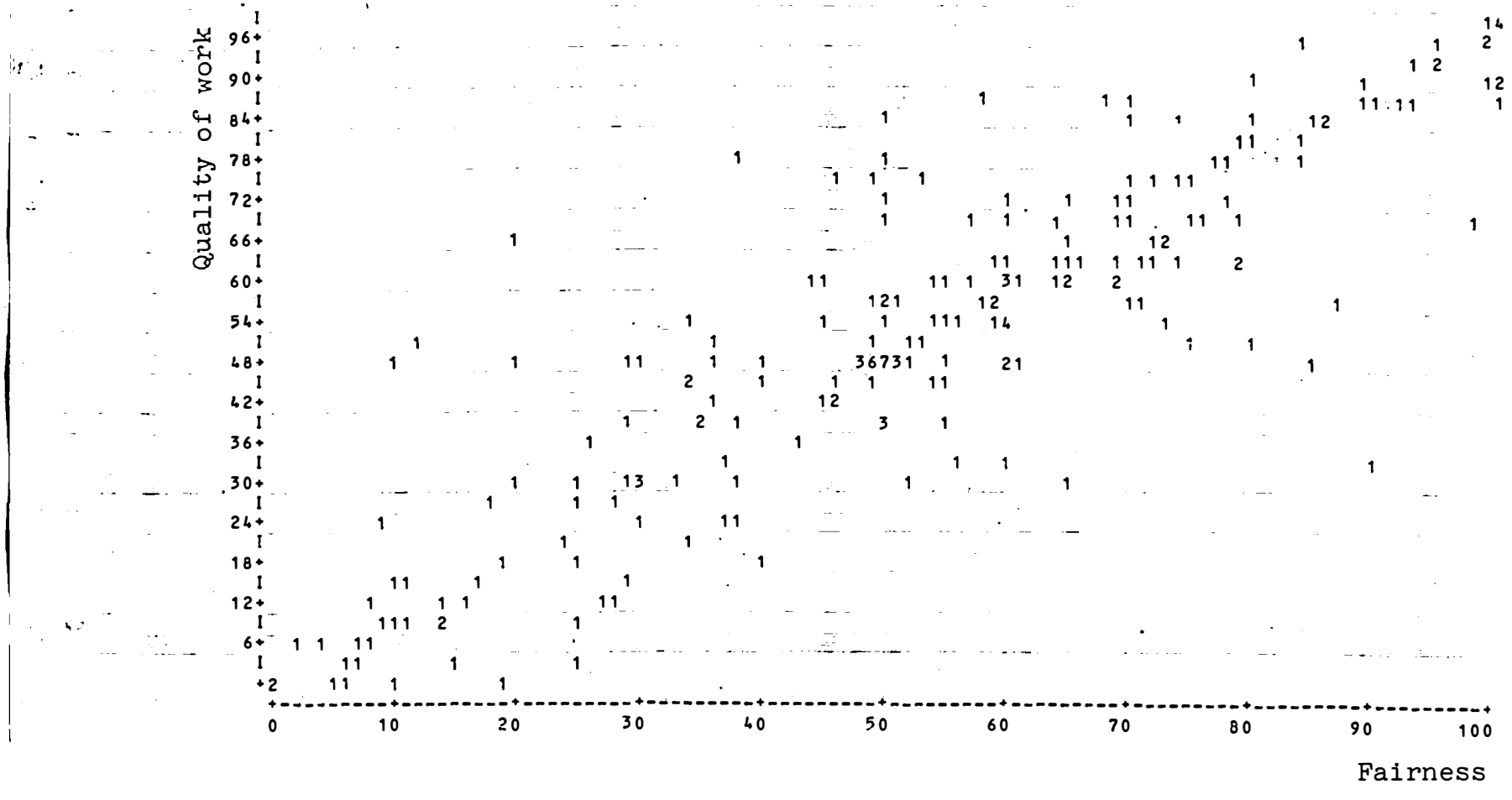

Figure 5--Ratings of Bundestag Members on Two Characteristics

more educated respondents.

The mean rating given the Bundestag in response to this question was 6.2, which corresponds to a rating of 56.2 on the 0-to-100 scale, if we assume that the choice of 0-point has no effect. This assumption, however, seems questionable. When similar items with different 0-points are compared, the mean rating is higher where the 0-point is in the middle instead of at the bottom. Apparently there is a tendency to avoid giving negative ratings, perhaps augmented here by the fact that "0", when not used as the midpoint, meant the lowest of the low in this same survey. Thus it is not a surprise that the mean opinion on the Bundestag is somewhat higher, spacially, than any of the mean specific ratings given to Bundestag members. Some of this difference may also be due to a tendency to evaluate political institutions more highly than the corresponding politicians, but we are not in a position to separate these two effects.

Our conclusion, above, about the low reliability of opinions about the Bundestag among less educated respondents is based on the product-moment correlations between each of the specific opinions and the general one. For those without the Abitur, these correlations fell between .27 and .33; for those with just the Abitur, they are much higher, ranging between .77 and .82. When we examine the correlations among the specific opinion items themselves, we find them high for all educational

groups: .83 to .88 for those without the Abitur, and .89 to .95 for those with just the Abitur. Once again, those with university education fall in between the two groups just mentioned. Thus the less educated group is consistent in its ratings of Bundestag members across characteristics when the items appear on the same sheet and the responses can be synoptically compared and even corrected; but when a general opinion that we expect to be strongly related to their specific ones is elicited about 40 minutes later, little of a relationship remains. Although this result gives us reason to question the seriousness of the less educated respondents' specific as well as general opinions about the Bundestag, the low correlation for the less educated group may be due to a misunderstanding of how to use the zero-midpoint scale.

Two slight secondary relationships in these data seem to reflect plausible patterns. Among the specific opinions, all of which have fairly strong correlations with each other for all educational groups, the two strongest correlations in the least educated group are those between the work done by members of the Bundestag and their other two qualities (trustworthiness and fairness); for the remaining educational groups, however, these are the two weakest correlations. This suggests that doing good work occupies a more central location in the constellation of values for the less educated, and a more peripheral one for the more educated respondents. The other very slight trend is for the less educated as a group distinguish less in general among the specific characteristics. There is only

a one-point difference between the lowest and the highest mean specific rating for those without the Abitur, versus a three-point difference for those with just the Abitur (and, as usual, a two-point difference for those with university education).

Let us finally turn to the dimensionality of responses to the 12 supportive and oppositional behaviors already discussed. The notion behind the list of behaviors was that they, or a subset of them, might constitute a scale of behavioral support and opposition, or extremism. If this were so, then behaviors that were more extreme would have several characteristics in common: respondents would less often approve of them, respondents would less often express a willingness to engage in them, respondents would less often have actually engaged in them, and respondents would on the average estimate that a smaller percentage of the general citizenry approves of them.

We have already seen in Figure 3 that there is a general correspondence between the perceived approval and the actual approval for these actions. A closer look at how the actions are ranked on all the support variables is offered by Table 2. Examination of the Table shows

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

that the actions are ranked roughly alike, but that there

Table 2

Rank Orders of Behaviors

Behaviors in Order of Appearance in Interview

1. Collecting petition signatures
2. Working in election campaign
3. Refusing military service
4. Occupying buildings
5. Withholding taxes & rent
6. Fighting with the police
7. Demonstrating legally
8. Convincing friends
9. Overthrowing government by force
10. Destroying property
11. Wildcat strike
12. Writing slogans on walls

Behaviors in Order of Increasing Extremity												
Perceived citizen approval: mean	1	8	7	2	3	11	5	4	6	12	10	9
Actual approval	8	1	2	7	3	11	5	4	12	9	6	10
Actual disapproval	1	7	8	2	3	11	5	4	12	9	6	10
Actual willingness	8	2	1	7	3	5	11	4	12	9	6	10
Actual unwillingness	1	2	7	8	3	5	11	4	12	9	6	10
Actual prior action[a]	1	8	7	2	11	5	12	6	3	4	9	10

[a]Action 3 would rank 5th (between 2 and 11) if women were excluded from the tabulation.

are some noticeable differences. If we wished to select the largest possible list of actions identically ranked on all these variables, we would have to limit ourselves to the following:

1 7 (5 or 11) (4 or 6 or 12) 10

As we reduce the set of variables on which the actions must be identically ranked, the number of rankable actions naturally grows. The (dis)approval and (un)willingness variables are the closest in their rankings.

When we move down from the level of ranking actions by the mean responses they elicit, and instead look at the way individual respondents rank the actions, we find that even if we take only one support variable at a time, respondents are not completely consistent in their

rankings of actions on that variable. Let us, for example, arbitrarily decide to call two actions (A and B) "clearly ranked" on the personal approval variable only when at least twice as many respondents approve A more than B as approve B more than A, or vice versa. (It is possible to approve one action "more than" another because three levels of approval were offered by the questions: approval, conditional approval, and disapproval.)

If we apply this definition, then at least 6 of the 66 pairs of actions are not clearly ranked on personal approval. To eliminate these unclear rankings from an approval scale, it would have to dispense with action 5, action 8, and action 2 or 7. It is interesting that the two actions that are least clearly ranked of all are 2 and 7: electoral campaigning and participation in an authorized demonstration. While 14.8% of the respondents gave more approval to campaigning than to demonstrating, 14.0% approved demonstrating more than campaigning.

Additional analysis would probably show that not only the level of approval for various actions differs across educational groups, as already noted, but also the relationship among actions. A single example will be offered here for the time being: among respondents without the Abitur, about 7 times as many approved participation in a petition drive more than refusal of military service as did the reverse. But among those with just the Abitur, only 3 times as many did so. A metaphorical way of expressing this perhaps confusing-sounding result is: Just about all the people with low education agreed that refusing military service is more extreme than collecting signatures for a petition; but among those with just the Abitur, there was considerably more controversy about this difference.

In general, there is reason to expect that pairs of actions that do not differ so much in average perceived extremity will not just be the objects of more disagreement in some subcultures and less disagreement in others, but will even be oppositely ranked by the majorities of the different subcultures. We are all well aware of such variations in perceived extremity at the cross-national level, in response to such actions as fasting and suicide-in-protest. But subcultural differences in extremity rankings may be common intrasocietally, too, with important consequences both for the construction of supportive and oppositional behavior scales and for the

understanding of intergroup conflict. Subcultural differences in the rank ordering of the extremity of political actions could be expected to deprive groups in a society of a common behavioral language of protest, making conflict more emotional, procedural, and difficult to resolve. By the same token, the elimination of nonconsensually ranked behaviors from behavioral support-opposition scales may be useful for the development of theories explaining certain general types of conflict, but may also inadvertantly direct attention away from the phenomenon of extremity perception conflict, which may have to be incorporated into our theories if they are to explain support and opposition in polities with deep ethnic, generational, and other cultural cleavages.[5]

Notes

[1]See David Easton, A Systems Analysis of Political Life (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), and David Easton, "The Conceptualization of Support" (unpublished manuscript), pp. 3, 13, 19.

[2]There is still an unexpectedly wide dispersal of ratings, however. Further steps to assure task comprehension are clearly necessary before we can say whether this reflects dissensus on the meanings of the statements, the inadequacy of the scale being used, or some other problem.

[3]Cf. Peter Schönbach, Sprache und Attitüden (Bern: Hans Huber, 1970).

[4]E.g. Milton Lodge, Bernard Tursky, Joseph Tanenhaus, and David Cross, "The Development and Validation of Political Attitude Scales: A Psychophysical Approach" (State University of New York at Stony Brook, Department of Political Science, Laboratory for Behavioral Research, Report No. 2, n.d.)

[5]This research was supported by a postdoctoral Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The data were collected with the collaboration of Edward N. Muller III, Rudolf Wildenmann, and others, under a grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.