

TO: NES Board  
 FROM: Gary Jacobson  
 RE: New Congressional Questions from 1985 Pilot Study

Several new questions on House and Senate members were tested in the pilot study. The main purpose of piloting the questions was to find out how many respondents could provide useful answers, particularly compared to similar questions we have been asking since 1978. Thus most of this report merely concerns the frequencies of responses. I use the unweighted sample and restrict the analysis to respondents who reported voting in 1984 (mainly because the data on earlier questions are limited to voters) and who have not moved (N=241).

CITIZEN INITIATED CONTACT

B2. During the last year, have you contacted your U.S. Representative, that is your Representative to the U.S. Congress, or anyone in your Representative's office?

Yes	28%
No	71
DK	0.4

The old question is

Have you (or anyone in your family living here) ever contacted [the U.S. Representative, named] or anyone in (his/her) office?

Yes	25%
No	73
DK	2

The distribution of responses is virtually identical (though it is somewhat odd to get a higher proportion responding "yes" for the shorter time-frame), and neither question seems obviously superior. The most interesting result here comes from crosstabulating responses to the two questions:

		New Contact Question		
		Yes	No	
Old Contact Question	Yes	12%	16%	N=210
	No	13%	59%	

If we are to believe this, 41 percent of the sample have contacted their congressman sometime. I do not know what to make of this, or how to use it for our purposes. It does suggest that the old question underestimated the proportion of voters who have contacted their congressman. It is difficult to see how the new question could solve this problem.

KEEPING IN TOUCH

B2. How good a job would you say (name of U.S. Representative or name of U.S Senator) does of keeping in touch with people in your (district/state)--does (he/she) do a very good job, fairly good, not very good, or a poor job of keeping in touch with the people of this (district/state)?

	Representative	Senator
Very Good	30%	21%
Fairly Good	54	52
Not Very Good	9	18
Poor	5	5
DK	3	0.4

As we would anticipate, House members are perceived to do a better job of keeping in touch, though both seem to be in good shape on this dimension. An interesting question would be whether or not voters have different expectations of keeping in touch for House and Senate members. That is, is a different standard applied? In any case, the difference here is large enough for these questions to be candidates for any study aiming at House/Senate comparisons.

Whether the House question alone is a candidate for the regular post-election survey is more doubtful, because it may simply add another item on which incumbents receive positive responses. But I would like to try it at least once. Crosstabulated with the approve/disapprove question on the incumbent's performance from the 1984 post-election survey, it looks like this:

	Approve	Disapprove	DK	N
Very Good	94%	4%	1%	(68)
Fairly Good	75	9	16	(117)
Not Very Good or Poor	41	26	33	(27)

Crosstabulated with the 1984 vote:

	Incumbent	Challenger	N
Very Good	86%	14%	(66)
Fairly Good	72	28	(115)
Not Very Good or Poor	50	50	(22)

So it may have some payoff.

CURRENT ISSUES

B5. Has there been any issue considered recently in Congress that is particularly important to you?

Yes	44%
No	50
DK/NA	7

B5a. What issue is that? (Up to 3 answers coded)

	%	N
Budget/Deficit	20	(32)
Taxes	17	(27)
Social Security	8	(12)
Farm economy	7	(11)
Other economic issues (5)	8	(12)
Total economic	60	(94)
Other domestic (8)	25	(39)
Foreign relations (8)	7	(11)
Defense/arms control (4)	6	(9)
DK/NA	2	

So far, this question looks good; 44 percent offer an answer, and their answers make sense in light of current congressional activities. There's quite a variety of things mentioned (the number in parentheses indicate the number of different responses coded in the more general categories), but the focus is on economic issues, especially the budget and taxes.

B5b. Has Senator \_\_\_\_\_ taken a position on (that issue/these issues)?

	%	% of Sample
Yes	44	19
No	22	10
DK	34	15

N=105

B5c. Would you say Senator \_\_\_\_\_'s position on (that issue/these issues) is close to your position, or not close to your position?

	%	% of Sample
Close	65	12
Not Close	17	3
Depends	4	1
DK	13	3

N=46

The question here is whether we get enough answers to establish the value of these questions (I have not tried to find out how accurate their judgments were). The proportion of respondents who are able to determine whether the senator is close or not close to them on specific issues (16%) is virtually identical to the proportion of voters in the 1982 survey who could remember the House incumbent's vote on a specific bill could say whether they agreed or disagreed with it (15%; the same figure from the 1978 study was 16%). Fewer "agreed" with the House member's vote (55%) than found the senator's position "close" to their own (76%). I think this is a good candidate for studies making House-Senate comparisons; whether it is superior to the usual House question is more doubtful, but the level of response is about the same, and I like the question better. Open for discussion.

**POSITION AND PROMINENCE**

B6. Does \_\_\_\_\_, one of the U.S. Senators from (name of state) hold any official post in Congress that makes (him/her) an especially important Senator?

Yes	31%
No	37
DK	33

B6a. What position is that? (Are there any others?)

	%	% of Sample
Specified, accurately	18	6
Specified, inaccurately	15	5
Unspecified ("leader"; "chair")	23	7
Mentions seniority	5	2
Mentions issue position	5	2
DK/NA	33	

Responses (up to three were recorded; no one offered more than two) to the first question look promising--67% of the respondents can answer it. But responses to the followup question indicate that few voters have an accurate notion of what official positions their Senators hold (several West Virginians thought Byrd still ran the Senate, for example). Still, they are a bit more aware of Senators' positions than Representative's positions:

B8. Does \_\_\_\_\_, the U.S. Representative to Congress in Washington from your district, hold any official position in Congress that makes (him/her) an especially important member of Congress?

Yes	15%
No	41
DK/NA	44

B8a. What position is that? (Are there any others?)

	%	% of Sample
Specified, accurately	31	5
Specified, innacurately	10	2
Unspecified ("leader"; "chair")	18	3
Mentions issue position	13	2
DK/NA	28	

For House candidates, this does not seem to be a promising question; responses are too few (unless we want to ask the question once simply to document the fact that formal positions are not widely known) When we do a Senate study with an equal number of respondents in each state, the question should be more useful and the responses more interesting.

B7. Is there anything else that makes Senator \_\_\_\_\_ stand out from other Senators in Washington?

Yes	35%
No	47
DK/NA	18

B7a. What makes (him/her) stand out? (Any other?)

Personal characteristics	59%
Policy-related	19
Keeps in touch, serves constituents	12
Other	6
DK/NA	4

B9. Is there anything that makes Representative \_\_\_\_\_ stand out from other members of the Congress in Washington?

Yes	29%
No	49
DK/NA	22

B9a. What makes (him/her) stand out? (Anything else?)

Personal characteristics	37%
Policy-related	20
Keeps in touch, serves constituents	35
Other	2
DK/NA	5

The interesting things here are again the House-Senate comparisons. Respondents are much more likely to mention that their representative is notable for keeping in touch and serving the district than to say the same thing about their senator. This is hardly surprising, but quite stark. More surprising is that senators

are no more "outstanding" for policy-related reasons than are representatives; some of us have argued that Senators's policy stances are more visible and that this makes them more vulnerable.

Beyond that, it is noteworthy that the distribution by category of response on these questions for House candidates is very similar to that for categories of responses to the traditional likes/dislikes questions about incumbents. They probably tap the same kind of information and assessments. Because the likes/dislikes questions can also be asked about nonincumbent candidates, they are generally superior. But for any study emphasizing House-Senate differences, this would be a useful "fishing" question.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. I do not see any clear need to change the candidate-initiated contact question. The distribution of responses looks similar and we should go with continuity.
2. The "keeping in touch" question ought to be added to the congressional set for at least one post election survey (and should be included in any survey designed for extensive House-Senate comparisons). Aside from picking up something that many observers think important, it could be useful to scholars who collect data on trips, mailings, etc., which could be inserted as contextual data.
3. The "current issues" set is a candidate to replace the traditional question on agreement or disagreement with a member's votes, though again the issue of continuity needs to be considered. This set is also a strong candidate for any attempt at House-Senate comparisons.
4. The "official position" questions do not seem to pick up much accurate information, but might be worth asking at least once on the post-election survey simply to get a clear picture of how infrequently information of this sort is known by voters. It's a more promising question for a 50 X 100 Senate election study.
5. The "standing out" questions are useful for House-Senate comparisons but add nothing to what we have already learned from the likes/dislikes questions about the categories through which voters perceive House incumbents. Thus they have a weak claim to time on the regular post-election survey.