

# ISR

CENTER FOR POLITICAL STUDIES / INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH / THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN 48106-1248

February 22, 1990

To: NES Board Members  
From: Mike Traugott  
Subject: Report on Pilot Study Items

In my memoranda of almost one year ago, I suggested a number of possible evaluations which could be undertaken in the context of the 1989 Pilot Study. From that list, the committee decided to pursue elements of three evaluations: rewording of the measures of contact with congressional candidates, repeated measures of recognition and evaluation of congressional candidates in order to assess campaign effects, and measures of evaluation of Ronald Reagan, as well as George Bush and Michael Dukakis, in order to look at "considered opinion" after the campaign in relation to campaign-based assessments. The latter two investigations, in my thinking, could be related to the Board's consideration of the utility and advisability of collecting more substantive data as part of pilot studies in the odd-numbered years.

Two of these topics - the contact measures and the shifts in thermometer ratings - are discussed in some detail below. On the matter of the decay in political knowledge about candidates, there is a briefer discussion and an attached paper prepared for a conference in Houston using some of these data. I would, of course, be willing to supply any additional information you might be interested in and would appreciate hearing back from the Board about your consideration of these issues.

### Testing of the Contact Measures

Many of the items in the Pre/Post election studies suffer from an ambiguity related to whether their focus is on campaign effects or effects of the representational process. If the intent was to measure campaign-related behavior and its effects, the measures of candidate-constituent contact have been flawed in their past administration by the lack of a precise reference to a time period during which the respondent might have been in or established contact. In other words, there is an implied "ever" in the past administration of the questions, complicating the problem of establishing the linkage between contact in the campaign period and candidate recognition. This problem differentially affects candidates for the House, where all seats are at stake, and the Senate, as well as for incumbents and challengers who may or may not have had prior elected service through which they might have had contact with (potential) constituents.

It is conceivable that these issues should be pursued with additional vigor in the 1990 study, as they were not completely testable in the 1989 pilot. For this recent study, only a limited test was possible of **post-election** contact. In one-half the Pilot Study sample, a question using the phrase "since January" (the "constrained" form of the question) was used as an indicator of contact since the last possible post-election interview dates, in comparison to the customary question wording (the "general" form of the question). Under this test condition, some hypotheses could be evaluated about the magnitude and direction of estimates of contact, as well as the relationship between these alternative measures on candidate recognition.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, the analysis is presented only for contact with House incumbents who were re-elected, in order to maximize the effective number of responses. Additional, more complex analyses could be performed on contact with Senate incumbents, looking at those who stood for re-election and those who did not. In some cases, much smaller n's would be involved, and mode effects would be problematical.

In order to provide some context for understanding the measurement questions here, the format and timing of the administration of the contact measures should be kept in mind. Since 1978, the contact measures have been asked about the House candidates in each post-election study, using a hand card listing various types of contact in conjunction with face-to-face interviewing. A screening question ascertained whether the respondent had ever had contact with the Representative or his/her office. The House measures were also included in the 1988 Senate Study and the 1989 Pilot Study, when they were administered on the telephone. In those surveys, obviously, no hand card was used, and the screening question was eliminated.<sup>2</sup> For Senate candidates, the items were only asked in 1978, and then again in the 1988 Senate Study and the 1989 Pilot Study.

The hypotheses which were tested as part of this analysis involved only differences which could be measured between the 1988 Pre/Post study and the 1989 Pilot Study and were as follows:

- 1) The use of the phrase "since January" should result in lower estimates of contact than the "general" question wording, both in the Pre-Post responses and in the Pilot Study responses which did not include the phrase.

- 2) The re-administration of the "general" question should have resulted in higher reported rates of contact than in the Pre-Post study, for two reasons. First, these were recontact interviews, and change could only have occurred in one direction for these respondents. Furthermore, there may have been a sensitization of the respondents to relations with the Representative from their district, which would serve to inflate reported rates as well.

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1984, part of the post-election study was conducted on the telephone, and the format of the questioning was altered. These data might be useful in analyzing mode effects, but they do not involve the same respondents as the 1989 Pilot Study nor any question wording experiments.

Data are presented in Table 1 which show the results of the evaluations of these hypotheses. In the first column, information is presented on the level of response to the "general" questions administered in the 1988 Pre/Post questionnaires. This information, obtained with a screener question and a hand card, provides a means of evaluating the characteristics of the 1989 Pilot Study sample, which was stratified on certain respondent characteristics and not randomly selected. These data show no significant differences in the responses to the contact measures by the respondents in the two split half samples at the time of their initial interviews.

The next column presents responses from the "full" Pilot Study sample for the same questions (combining the two treatment halves). For four of the questions, there were no significant differences in the levels of contact (contact with the representative/office, meeting the Representative personally, talking to the staff, and receiving mail). In one sense, these are activities which require relatively active behavior on either the respondents' or the members' part. For the two measures which involve media exposure to the member (reading about him/her in the newspaper or seeing her/him on TV), there are significantly higher aggregate mentions of contact/exposure at the time of the Pilot Study. This suggests a "sensitization" effect to me, but a clear demonstration of this requires additional analysis.

The data presented in the last two columns of Table 1 indicate both the differences between the responses which were derived from the two question wordings and the previously expressed levels of contact. When the first four items were asked using "since January," the rates were in fact no different than they were when these same respondents answered in the fall. For three of the items, the rates are all very low (between 7% and 9%), while two out of three respondents still reported getting mail. However, there are higher expressed rates of media exposure to the members

even when the time period was constrained, which could also be the result of a sensitization effect.

When the "general" form of the question was repeated, the responses were consistently higher, and significantly so for the mediated contact measures. The confound of mode, time, and sensitization in these measures cannot be separated, of course; but there is also the possibility of response error which must be assessed.

As a second part of the evaluation of these items, a series of correlational analyses were run. In one, the intercorrelations of the two items asked of the same respondents were evaluated; and in the second, the correlations between contact and recognition were reproduced in the 1988 Pre/Post survey and among the Pilot Study respondents by form of question.

The results of the first set of correlations are presented in Table 2, based upon gammas relating the responses for the same dichotomous variable as reported by respondents at two points in time. These correlations are not perfect even for the "general" form of the question. For five of the measures, the values range from .69 to .96. For three of the measures (contacting the office, meeting the member personally, and talking to the staff) the correlations of the general form at two points in time are higher than the correlations of the "constrained" form and the Pre/Post responses. For one item (receiving mail) the correlation is higher in the constrained form; and for another item (reading about the member in the newspaper) they are the same. The correlations are weakest for the item measuring viewing the member on television; and lowest of all for the general form of the question.

As shown by the data in Table 3, more precise measurement of contact does not lead to higher correlations with candidate recognition, either in the campaign period or outside of it. In three cases, the correlations of recognition and the variables resulting from the "constrained" measures are somewhat higher than with responses based upon the "general" form of the contact

questions. And the correlations of candidate recognition with an additive Contact Index constructed from the post-election responses is much higher than the same index constructed from the Pilot Study responses, suggesting a campaign effect. Additional analyses of these relationships should be modeled to result in regressions which contain estimates of error components in the measurement. Such analyses would result in more precise specifications of the nature of these relationships, but they are not likely to alter the basic relationships which have been observed over time since 1978.

The basic issue which this analysis raises for the NES Board's deliberation about the 1990 design is whether you want to study "the campaign" or the basic representational relationship between "incumbents and their constituents." If your focus is the campaign, as my own biases would suggest, then more constrained measurement of campaign contact are in order. If your interest is in interaction with constituents, then the general form of the question is sufficient. It is conceivable that both questions could be pursued in the same study, which could be achieved with split-half question wordings within the same constituency.

The obvious point here is that in House races, contact with challengers and even candidates in some open races may be problematical; but it usually occurs only during the campaign. Nevertheless, the contact with incumbents during the campaign should be distinguished from contact which is part of their representational function, in order to make comparisons with the behavior of their opponents - and the resulting effects in each case. On the Senate side, these issues are more complicated because of the number of Senate candidates who are House members. Here the issue is one of distinguishing incumbency contact from service in one office from campaign contact when running for another.

All of these questions are best asked in the post-election study, if the standard design is used and it is only possible to ask them once. In the 1988 Senate study, some analyses could be

pursued by comparing the responses from states in which there is no race with those from states in which there is one. But this would require combining datasets over time in order to maximize analysis of differences between campaign-based contacts and those which are more likely to occur as part of the representation function (or how things change as the campaign approaches). This is, of course, an important design feature of the proposed Senate Study, and it might provide an opportunity for using two different question forms as well. The question of whether direct and mediated contact by Senators is the same as that for Representatives would still have to be considered (see below), but a start on understanding campaign versus representational effects could be made.

#### **Changes in Congressional Candidates' Recognition and Evaluation**

A second issue which I raised was the evaluation of campaign effects on candidate recognition and recall by looking "outside" the campaign period at the decay in these measures over time. In other words, one way of assessing how much the campaign affects "learning" about candidates is to look at how much is "forgotten" after the campaign is over, and how rapidly. The primary utility of such analyses would be to try to integrate studies in the non-campaign years with those conducted during the campaign, in order to increase our understanding about how campaigns affect political learning, leading up to, during, and following this period of high stimulation and information. Initially these studies could focus on candidate-centered knowledge, but there could be other fruitful areas of research involving political knowledge and socialization, for example.

This was the first analysis which I pursued, as part of preparing a paper for the Houston Symposium on Electing the Senate (A copy of that paper is attached). The hypotheses were straightforwardly derived from the existing literature. The greater resources of senatorial campaigns suggest that recognition

and recall rates during the campaign should be higher than in House races, for challengers and candidates in open races but not so clearly for incumbents. The "decay" rates for these measures (from the 1988 Pre/Post to the Pilot Study in Summer 1989) should reflect greater forgetting for challengers, candidates in open races, and incumbents, in that order, and generally at higher levels for the House candidates than for the Senate. This should also be more the case for recall than recognition since the former involves the more difficult cognitive task to begin with. The main findings here from the analysis are presented below:

1. A comparison of the Pilot Study data and previous NES studies shows that there was a slight drop in aggregate recognition rates and a large drop in aggregate recall rates from the fall study to last summer. The "decay" was much greater for challengers than incumbents, with open race candidates falling in the middle. And the declines were greater in the House than in the Senate.

2. Looking over time for the same respondents, the "decay" rates of forgetting were from 53% to 81% on recall in Senate races and 50% to 90% in House races, with the same relative ordering by type of candidacy. For recognition, the decay rates ranged from 2% to 24% for the Senate candidates and from 4% to 30% for the House candidates.

3. A multivariate analysis showed that the shifts in recognition and recall at the individual level could best be explained by education, political knowledge, and media exposure - especially television - and not by party identification or education.

The analysis raises a number of issues for further research, any of which NES could choose to adopt as part of its mission. The most important is how candidate visibility is established and maintained by candidates in the campaign period and by elected officials between campaigns. Differences in visibility between Senators and Representatives, given the variations in the physical characteristics of their constituencies, may be a function of





which the standard 0 to 100 scale was modified to a 0 to 10 scale, making calculation of difference measures problematical.

Data are presented in Table 4 which summarize the variables which were computed for Reagan, Bush, and Dukakis. Some difficulties in computation should be explained. Evaluations of Reagan on a 100-point scale were only asked in the 1988 Pre-election Study and in the Pilot, while evaluations of Bush and Dukakis were asked in all three studies. A Pre-to-Post difference can be seen as a "campaign effect," while Pre-to-Pilot and Post-to-Pilot differences reflect "considered opinions" over time which take different factors into account. While the use of campaign ads is eliminated for both former candidates, Bush has the powers of incumbency in the White House to influence his news coverage while Dukakis has had a news stream of reported Massachusetts difficulties to affect his. But none of the analysis presented below involves the use of content analysis.

In order to set the context for evaluating changes in the evaluations of political figures, basic information is presented in Table 4. Since the later time point was subtracted from the earlier, positive numbers indicate **declines** in evaluations and negative numbers indicates **increases** in evaluations. On average, the shifts in evaluations of all three figures were close to zero, with large standard deviations (typically about 20 scale points). For Reagan and Bush, the average shifts were slightly positive, and they were about as negative for Dukakis. An ordinal scale was constructed which indicated the relative magnitude of the differences in the thermometer ratings, primarily as a means for subsequently investigating correlates of these shifts.

It is easiest to review these results by the time reference of the differences. For example, the first panel in the table indicates shifts in evaluations of Bush and Dukakis across the campaign. There is a bimodal distribution of the differences for Bush, with about as many respondents evaluating him in a much more favorable light (from -11 to -100 thermometer points) as those who

evaluate him in a much less favorable light (11 to 100 thermometer points). For Dukakis, on the other hand, twice as many viewed him this much less favorably after the campaign.

For Ronald Reagan, there was also a bimodal distribution of shifting evaluations from the beginning of the campaign to the 1989 Pilot Study. This distribution is very similar, although slightly less positive, than the equivalent distribution for Bush. And the change for Dukakis was clearly skewed in the unfavorable direction with twice as many changing their evaluations in that direction compared to those who became more positive.

The third panel suggests that most of the damage to Dukakis came across the campaign period, as the ratio of much less favorable attitudes (11 to 100 thermometer points) to much more favorable attitudes (-11 to -100 thermometer points) declined from 2.2 in the Pre-to-Pilot difference to 1.2 in the Post-Pilot difference. Overall for Dukakis, less favorable evaluations declined from 55.5% of all evaluations to 42.1%, while more favorable evaluations increased from 27.2% to 34.3%.

There is a strong element of partisanship underlying these shifts in evaluation, as demonstrated by the data presented in Table 5. Using tau, as a measure of association, Republicans were more likely to give Bush and Reagan more positive evaluations after the campaign, while Democrats were more likely to give Dukakis more positive evaluations. These relationships were greater for the Pre-to-Pilot differences than the Post-to-Pilot differences, as suggested by the data presented in Table 4.

Measures of attention to the campaign as well as attention to media coverage of the campaign on television and in newspapers were generally not related to these shifts in evaluations. This is not surprising, as it would be variations in the evaluative nature of post-election media content, rather than exposure, which should explain the shifts in evaluation; but no content analysis was conducted. And the wording experiments on media exposure during the Pilot Study period complicate the analysis of small subsamples.