

ed file

ISR

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

MEMORANDUM

TO: NES Board

RE: 1980 Precinct Data Returns Project

DATED: December 14, 1983

Task:

In 1980 an attempt was made to code precinct level returns as part of the aggregate, contextual data merged onto the 1980 pre/post election study. Returns were sought from local election offices in the course of vote validation. The returns coded were for the Democratic presidential primary -- including Brown, Carter, Kennedy, no preference, and all others; the Republican presidential primary including Anderson, Baker, Bush, Connally, Crane, Dole, Reagan, no preference, and all others; the presidential general election returns including Carter, Reagan, Anderson, Clark, and all others; the Senate election returns for Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, and all others; and similarly for the Governor returns: and the House returns. Detailed efforts were made to consistency check these returns in terms of coverage and to make sure that they properly added up to the total vote returns. This checking process revealed a variety of problems with the precinct returns and with the coding conventions which had been used. These problems were not pervasive but were troublesome and frequent enough to produce substantial inconsistencies throughout the data. This led to the eventual abandonment of merging the returns on for 1980 at the precinct level and suggest changes for such future efforts. To that end, we have documented some of the major problems in this memo.

Consistency Checks

The following things were consistency checked within precincts: 1) the precinct totals, 2) the drop-off in race totals by level of race, 3) the rank ordering of the major and minor party candidates vote proportions, 4) the missing data, and 5) the sample coverage.

The Form of the Data:

The form of the data had two basic types of problems: 1) defining the appropriate precinct identification to use for the respondent in merging contextual data and 2) retrieving the correct precinct electoral data from election office published sources.

Initially, we had the problem of identifying the precinct of the NES respondents in the vote validation portion of the study since we worked from recontact addresses. Recontact addresses frequently are post office or other mailing addresses, work addresses, or addresses where the respondent expects to move in the near future. Such addresses are obviously incorrect and inadequate for precinct identification. Also, when panel respondents moved in the course of the year, the issue of which precinct was appropriate for contextual purposes arose--the one they came from or the one they had moved to. For contextual purposes we tried to identify and merge primary data on the precinct of residence at the time of the primary election and merge general election data on the precinct of residence at the time of the general election, if the two locations were different. Unfortunately, in many cases the previous relevant addresses and precinct were not available for movers. This process was further complicated as respondents moved across states which had different primary election dates and therefore had, at least ignoring residency requirements, multiple potential eligibilities. Finally, rural respondents in particular often had inadequate addresses for identifying precincts. In some cases for registered respondents interviewers were able to scan the number of possible precincts (when few) to do the identification. In general for address problem cases with self-reported unregistered respondents and "presumed" liars we were never able to attempt such search techniques to identify the proper precinct for the merge of the contextual data. In many cases such a search would have been an enormous task anyway.

On another level, precinct returns came in from the local election offices in a variety of forms -- some more complete and better labeled than others. Some of the precincts were not labeled for city or county. Some precincts were initially incorrectly identified when we requested returns, which added to the subset of precincts for which we never received correct returns.

Offices sometimes combined results for split or small precincts before they were sent in. We (double) coded the same results for each precinct to resolve this problem.

Results for minor candidates were added together by some election offices. Our candidate lists prepared from Congressional Quarterly also proved inadequate to tell us when minor candidates were running. In some cases we had results for minor candidates we were not expecting. In other cases we did not have votes for minor candidates when we expected them. We could not always distinguish when minor candidates had or had not been on the ballot, from when minor candidates had received no votes (or when minor candidate results had not been listed by the election office). Our candidate lists were also particularly inadequate in indicating which elections allowed formal no preference votes. Ultimately, it became impossible to consistency check any but major party candidates and we only further consistency checked precincts where minor party candidates appeared to get more votes than the major party candidates.

To a limited extent the proliferation of minor party candidates had been anticipated in the House races. Thus two "other" codes were used in these races -- one for the minor party candidate with the most vote and a "remainder" code for the sum of the remaining minor candidates. This

distinction was sometimes impossible to maintain because the election offices had already combined the minor candidate returns into a single category.

Another problem was that the same candidate frequently ran under several party labels. The election offices handled these cases differently, sometimes adding them together and sometimes not. The most frequent problem in 1980 was Conservative Party votes for Reagan. When possible, we kept these votes separate and coded them under the different parties.

Finally, some southern states did not have general elections. In 1980, in Louisiana the margins of the primary election results eliminated the need for a general election. To resolve this, no general election results were coded for Louisiana and only the results of the winners of the primaries were coded for the general election.

Coding Inconsistencies:

These data inconsistencies were accentuated by a coding inconsistency that developed when the staff did not have enough missing data codes to distinguish all of the contingencies which arose. The lack of clarity resulted in Codes "0" and "9" being mixed in their use. In addition the intended distinctions were often difficult to make given the state of some of the returns. "9" ended up being used when 1) a candidate was in the race but was missing data for the number of votes, 2) no candidate was running under the party label, 3) we did not get the precinct returns, or 4) the returns were inadequately labeled. "0" was intended to be used only when a candidate on the ballot got no votes, but "9" and "0" were frequently mixed especially for Libertarian and minor party candidates when it was unclear whether the candidate had actually appeared on the ballot. Also, "0" was used unsystematically for a variety of contingencies, which emerged as the coding proceeded. The multiple meanings for codes "9" and "0" later posed obvious problems for consistency checks.

Recommendations

First we should seriously evaluate whether we want to do this contextual data gathering given the resources needed to do it correctly. If that decision is made, our experience in 1980 allows us to anticipate and thus avoid some of the pitfalls.

- 1) We should develop clearer guidelines for minor candidates and missing data and develop the appropriate number of codes to indicate the various contingencies.
- 2) We should develop an explanatory note with a sample form for the election offices to indicate what data we need and in what form -- with particular reference to minor party candidates, split precincts, and multiple party listings.
- 3) We need to obtain clearer addresses with the particular links to precinct kept in mind. For some respondents this may mean collecting multiple addresses and carrying those along in the recontact file.

- 4) We need to obtain clearer definitions of the precinct identification for purposes of the contextual data and collect that at both the pre-election stage for primaries and the post-election stage for general elections.