

Some Suggestions for Future Congressional Election Studies

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Congressional election research has existed in the shadow of the more glamorous presidential election studies for the last twenty years. The concerns of the latter have largely defined the boundaries of the former. It is understandable that presidential elections should have attracted more scholarly attention than congressional elections. It is unfortunate that the most interesting research questions concerning congressional elections have not been addressed because of a preoccupation with presidential voting behavior.

I am suggesting that the subject of voting in congressional elections raises different research questions and therefore requires a different research design than does the subject of presidential voting behavior.

Three generalizations came out of the highly influential Stokes and Miller study of the 1958 congressional election: (1) that voting in congressional elections is dominated by partisan considerations, (2) that voters know almost nothing about either the congressional parties or individual members of Congress, and (3) that partisan defection in voting for Congress is largely explained by the name recognition advantage enjoyed by incumbents. Subsequent developments have raised serious questions about these generalizations. The most puzzling and probably the most important change has been the growing advantage of incumbency in House

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elections. John Ferejohn has demonstrated that the advantage of incumbency involves something more than simple name recognition, but just what is involved remains unclear. I have attempted to show that reputation provides a better explanation of the incumbency effect than simple name recognition in a study of one House race. However, comparative data on several House contests is needed to resolve this problem.

The incumbency effect raises several important questions for research on voting in congressional elections: (1) How much do voters know about incumbents and challengers in House elections? (2) How do voters get information about incumbents and challengers? (3) What criteria do voters use to evaluate incumbents and challengers? and (4) How does a congressman's performance in office affect his standing with his constituents?

For the past twenty years it has not been possible to address these questions because SRC has not included any questions in its election surveys about individual congressional candidates. It is time for a significant departure in the design of the midterm election study. In order to analyze the relationship between the individual member of Congress and the voters in his district, it is necessary to obtain data on the job performance of the representative as well as voters' perceptions of his performance. For this purpose, it might be desirable to select a limited number of congressional districts for intensive study, including oversampling of the voters to provide an adequate data base for analysis. Respondents in these selected districts

would be questioned about their knowledge and evaluation of the incumbent congressman including (1) personal traits and characteristics, (2) political philosophy and issue positions, (3) services provided to individual constituents, and (4) protection and promotion of district interests. Voter attitudes in these areas could then be related to objective measures of the incumbent's performance including (1) voting record, (2) attention to constituency matters, (3) committee assignment, and (4) self-promotion through mailings, newsletters, media appearances, etc. In this way it should be possible to determine how accurate voters' perceptions are, and what voters are most concerned about with regard to the congressman's performance. In addition, voters should be questioned about their sources of information about the congressman: television, newspapers, personal contact, mailings sent out by the incumbent, etc. Of course, respondents should be asked parallel questions about the challenger. Interviewing should be done as soon after the election as possible to maximize response validity, given the low salience of House races.

The greatest obstacle to meaningful competition for House seats is the growing advantage of incumbency (or perhaps the growing disadvantage of challengers). The approach which I have outlined should shed considerable light on the reasons for this development and possibly suggest counter-measures to restore competition.