

BOARD OF OVERSEERS

National Election Studies
Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan

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July 27, 1977

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing on behalf of the Board of Overseers of the National Election Studies of the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. As the enclosed announcement indicates, the Center recently received a national resources grant from the National Science Foundation to continue its election surveys over the next five years. The work of the Center, in this connection, will be advised and guided by the Board of Overseers as trustees for the larger scholarly community interested in electoral and related research.

In carrying out its charge, the Board will arrange a series of conferences and workshops designed to bring the research ideas and interests of the scholarly community to bear on the content and design of future election studies. A number of conferences are being planned for the academic year 1977-78. The Board will, in due time, alert you and your colleagues to all of these conferences, but the immediate purpose of this letter is to call attention to the conference on "Congressional Election Research" to be held at the University of Rochester on October 27-28, 1977.

Because of limited resources, we will only be able to invite to this conference a relatively small number of scholars, certainly no more than twenty. However, because we are seeking as wide participation as possible, we hope that all of those interested in Congressional election research will respond to the enclosed memorandum. This memorandum was prepared by Professors Richard Fenno and Edward Tufte to suggest the substantive contents and to delineate the boundaries of the conference on Congressional election research. From among those responding to the Fenno-Tufte memorandum, the Board of Overseers will select the largest number whom our resources permit to participate in the conference.

Inasmuch as the announcement of the NSF grant was made only recently, we are pressed in regard to the deadline for receipt of papers or memoranda which will be considered by the conference. The conference, in turn, must be held as early as possible because it will be only the first step in designing the 1978 election survey. We must have all responses to this invitation in hand by September 26. We will then send out

invitations to those selected for participation by the end of September. Needless to say, the Board will cover the travel, lodging, meal and out-of-pocket expenses of the participants.

As to the nature or length of the papers or memoranda which the Board would like to receive, we must remain rather vague, leaving it up to the respondents to define for themselves both the nature and scope of the reply. The conference objectives are outlined in the Fenno-Tufte memorandum. A single good idea presented in a relatively short memorandum might be more persuasive than presenting many less well-developed ideas in a long paper. Moreover, at this stage of developing the 1978 study design we are more interested in receiving broad suggestions and general arguments concerning Congressional election research than in assessing the merits of particular items one might wish to see included in the survey instrument.


This conference is intended to be only the beginning of the involvement of the broader scholarly community in the Congressional election studies. The Board expects to choose from among conference participants a much smaller number who are prepared to work more intensively with the CPS/NES staff in pre-testing new material and in other ways shaping the final research instrument. Moreover, as the Fenno-Tufte memorandum indicates, we are looking forward to 1982 and 1986, and we intend to organize further occasions for bringing still other interested scholars into the orbit of the Congressional election studies.

In conclusion, let me emphasize the importance of your bringing this request to the immediate attention of your colleagues and other scholars. Wide participation in the work of the National Election Studies, now made possible by the grant from the National Science Foundation, has been the dream of many scholars for many years. While the relationship between the national scholarly community, the Board of Overseers and the Principal Investigators at Michigan will have to evolve gradually as experience accumulates, an unusual opportunity has been created by the national resource grant. Much of what will be done in the coming years will be experimental and may be flawed, but we believe that a giant stride in the development of political science is in the making. We hope that many scholars, even those who may not be able to participate in the October conference, will make the effort to contribute to the Congressional election studies by responding at this time. All memoranda should be typed to permit ready reproduction. They should be sent not later than September 23 to Board of Overseers, National Election Studies, P.O. Box Z, Stanford, California 94305.

If there are several persons at your institution who would like to receive the Fenno-Tufte memorandum in order to prepare a memorandum for consideration at the October conference, please have them write to me or call 415-497-2612 at Stanford University. Questions concerning the program of the Board in general can be directed to any of the Board members. Particular questions concerning the conference on Congressional Election Research should be addressed to Professors Fenno or Tufte.

Speaking for the Board of Overseers,

Sincerely yours,


Heinz Eulau

MEMORANDUM FOR
CONFERENCE ON CONGRESSIONAL ELECTION RESEARCH

The familiar series of voting studies conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan has focused primarily on voting behavior in presidential elections. Scholars with strong research interests in congressional elections have frequently expressed the opinion that their purposes have been inadequately served by the questions and the data produced from the Michigan surveys. The October Conference on Congressional Election Research is being convened to provide an opportunity for scholars interested in researching congressional elections to exchange ideas on the study of congressional elections, to discuss the ways in which the Michigan Center for Political Studies can most appropriately assist in such studies, and to help the Center for Political Studies design its upcoming 1978 election survey.

The opportunity presented to the scholarly community by such a conference is both short-term and long-term. In the short-term, there is the potential for adding to, altering or otherwise affecting the actual questions in the 1978 CPS election study. In the longer run, there is the potential for reorienting the CPS election studies toward a greater and a more continuous focus on congressional elections. The recent National Science Foundation grant to CPS will make it easier than in the past to make plans for election studies two, four, or even six years hence. Therefore, as we think about the 1978 survey, it will be possible to think, too, about continuities with the 1980 survey and, particularly, with another mid-term election survey in 1982.

The conveners of the October conference have neither the wisdom

nor the wish to foreclose on the range of subjects which might be discussed. They start only with the awareness that our textbooks on American government, on Congress and on electoral behavior are painfully thin on the subject of congressional elections. Compared to what we know about "the American voter" or "elections and the political order" on the presidential level, what do we know about such matters on the congressional level? It is our hunch that a sizable body of scholars will say "not enough." Our desire, therefore, is to find out who those scholars are, bring some of them together and see what they might propose--generally and specifically--to remedy the situation.

Political scientists have been interested in congressional elections for many reasons. A quick glance at some of their expressed interests may stimulate members of the scholarly community to set down their research ideas and/or research plans in a memorandum to the CPS/NES Board of Overseers.

Students of Congress have wanted to account for congressional behavior--individual and collective--by understanding the electoral situation faced by members of the House and Senate. We know that election and reelection are the necessary conditions for everything a member of Congress does. We have observed the increasing success with which House members, particularly, have achieved reelection in recent years. And this has led to some lively theorizing among students of Congress about the causes of reelection success or "the decline of the marginals" or the effects of incumbency. On the empirical side, however, a lack of data pertaining to voting for Congress hampers the testing of these theories. Other students of Congress have observed the striking contrast between the reelection success of members of Congress and the

low public esteem accorded Congress as an institution. They have speculated as to why this should be so, that "we love our congressmen but not our Congress." But, again, theorizing has proceeded in the absence of survey data on citizen attitudes. Other students have observed differences between the performance of the Senate and the House, and have wondered about the extent to which these differences might be rooted in differing electoral situations.

From another angle, students of electoral behavior have been interested in congressional elections because they have wondered whether and to what degree their generalizations about voting behavior are specific to a single office--the presidency. They are interested, therefore, in comparing voting behavior in presidential and congressional elections, along any number of dimensions. Most generally, they want to know whether party identification, issues and candidate factors are weighted the same in influencing a vote for Senator or Representative as for President. If not, why not? Do long-term and short-term forces operate the same way in the two--or three--sets of elections? If not, why not?

Whether students begin with interests in Congress or in voters, their research runs into the same shortage of survey information. Why do people vote for Congress as they do? What do they know about their member for Congress? What do they know about the challenger? Where do they get their information? Do they vote differently when there is no incumbent? What perceptions do they have of the incumbent as compared with the non-incumbent? How do they evaluate their member of Congress? What do they know about Congress as an institution? How do they evaluate the performance of Congress as an institution? Is there any relationship between their evaluation of their Senator or Representative and their

evaluation of the institution? Have they ever had any contact with their member of Congress? There are, in short, many questions concerning citizen information, perceptions, attitudes and contacts which remain unanswered or incompletely answered for Senators and Representatives. Some questions have been asked occasionally; few questions have been asked regularly, over a series of elections.

Sometimes, voting for House and Senate takes place at the same time as voting for President; sometimes, it does not. Political scientists have wondered about the differences between voting for Congress in presidential years and voting for Congress in non-presidential mid-term years. In some cases, students have compared presidential and mid-term elections in order to measure the impact of presidential level voting on voting for Congress. There has been a long-standing interest, for instance, in such phenomena as presidential coattails and split ticket voting. In other cases, students have examined only mid-term elections, in order to examine certain influences on voting in the absence of presidential elections. Recently, for instance, students have used mid-term elections to study, over the long term, the effects of economic conditions and/or the incumbent president's popularity on voting. Scholars with an interest in mid-term elections may find mid-term survey data helpful in pursuing their concerns. How do voters feel about their economic conditions? What do voters know about and how do they evaluate presidential performance? How can political scientists determine whether such factors enter into the vote decision?

For other political scientists, congressional elections have been of special interest because they are particularly useful in exploring questions of representation. There has been a strong interest in probing

the relationship between citizen attitudes on issues and congressional performance on those same issues. Students have sought to assess the degree of congruence--and the conditions affecting the degree of congruence--between the individual member of Congress and his constituents. They have been particularly anxious to have survey data on voter attitudes collected on a congressional district basis. Thus, in addition to a lack of data, students of representation have felt that data should be collected on the basis of a different sampling procedure--one that would allow scholarly confidence that voter attitudes and congressional performance could be matched on a district by district basis. And, intrigued by the 1958 SRC study, students of representation have felt it would be desirable to have relevant data for a series of elections. Mid-term election surveys, free from the pressure to ask questions about the presidential election, are a particularly appropriate vehicle for such a series.

Scholarly interest in representation is but one of several system-level interests that relate to congressional elections. Students interested in such matters as public confidence in our national political institutions, the overall responsiveness of government to citizen concerns, and the performance of the permanent bureaucracy may find survey data on congressional elections helpful in testing or enriching their theories.

Political scientists, then, have studied congressional elections the better to understand Congress, voters, elections and the American political system. These reasons overlap, of course; there have been other reasons, too; and new reasons will come to light as scholars put their minds to the prospect of the October conference. All expressed

interests cannot be met in the 1978 election survey. Some can be equally well met, or better met, perhaps, in later surveys. But unless scholars articulate their needs and desires in the congressional election area, they may not be heard. The Conference on Congressional Election Research is an explicit invitation by the Board of Overseers for the Center for Political Studies' National Election Studies to the scholarly community to articulate its interests, and an implicit promise by CPS and the Board to do what is possible to serve those interests.

Richard F. Fenno

Edward Tufte

July 1977