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Enclosed is a memo in response to the Congressional Election Research Conference announcement and the Ferro-Tufte memo.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Hinckley".

Barbara Hinckley
Professor

Congressional Election Research: Information and Incumbency

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Our knowledge of "American voting behavior" may be limited to the atypical presidential contest. Indeed we may have, as someone said before, only the ear of the elephant in hand, with a large gray area remaining unexplored. Research on congressional elections, along with other subpresidential contests, is still in early stages-- in large part due to the lack of survey data on these contests. The proposed conference, then, might be less well served by individuals' advancing specific research proposals than by concentrating collective wisdom on maximum return for a small number of basic survey questions. Accordingly, this memo outlines two broad subject areas that might be addressed and the kind of basic data needed to address them. It concerns voter information about congressional races and the advantage of incumbency, the links between them, and the implications-- both academic and practical-- depending on what these links are found to be.

Attempts to explain voting in congressional races require data on voter information not presently available. Past studies indicate voter information is low, varies from incumbent to challenger, and can be sharply differentiated from information about the presidential contest. We do not know, however, the range or content of variation in information or the conditions-- in or before the campaign-- under which such variation may occur. Nor do we know the kind of cognitive processes by which voters make choices for subpresidential contests-- the content of the perception, direct or indirect means by which it is transmitted to perception or translated from perception to voter choice. Information varies between presidential and congressional contests; the ways of organizing and processing this information may vary as well. We have not pushed beyond the first "don't know" responses. Those who have read or heard nothing about the candidates, cannot name their names, and care little or none about the outcome still manage to vote in the contest-- a large majority for the incumbent and not all along the dictates of party I D.

The subject of incumbency also needs further clarification. We know that congressional incumbents are strongly advantaged, that information is greater for incumbents than challengers, and that the information tends to be positively perceived. But we have linked only inferentially information as source of this advantage and have not distinguished kinds of information that may be available. Thus recent

widely different explanations of congressional voting, stressing incumbency and name recognition, office-related support and service, or voter satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the economy or presidential policies, depend for their support on basic data not presently available. Perhaps even more basically, we have not identified the conditions under which incumbents are defeated or how variation in kind or amount of information may be related to this. There has been a recent decline in Senate incumbency success rates-- dropping steadily since 1968 from 90 percent to close to 75 percent of successful general election contests. Unlike the "vanishing marginals" in the House, it is the incumbents, not the marginals, who are vanishing in the Senate and the question has both immediate and larger theoretical interest. Something is happening in some Senate races that did not happen before, that is not happening in other races, and that is not happening in the House. But what it is we are not at present able to say.

Questions linking information and incumbency have far-ranging academic and practical political implications. What gets across in congressional races and what is the variation from one race to another? How important, if at all, is money spent and television budgeted in disseminating this information? What are the conditions-- in visibility, kind of information transmitted or means of transmission-- under which incumbents can be defeated? To what extent can the assumptions underlying election strategies and campaign spending, congressional constituency service and campaign reform, be supported or questioned? Concerning the recent Senate phenomenon, one might speculate that it is increased challenger visibility (before the campaign, from party or primary recruitment processes) or increased money spent for specific kinds of information, or change in information content or processes. One factor may be critical and the others unimportant or it may be some combination of the above. But to explore the question and test such speculations, one would need at the minimum data on (1) voter information about both incumbent and challenger, (2) voter perceptions about incumbent and challenger, and (3) sources of information about both, coded as available or not before the campaign. It may or may not be money or any specific campaign-related practices. It may or may not have anything to do with particular incumbents, their attributes or their behavior in Congress. But until we can get basic data on both incumbency and information, these and other questions cannot be answered-- by the candidates, campaign reformers, or students of congressional elections.

The same basic data, then, on voter information and perception about candidates may serve a wide range of academic and practical,

theoretical and empirical interests. None is presently or regularly available from the CPS election studies. Such data might broadly be categorized as follows:

Questions measuring information content: First, following past studies, we need to begin to accumulate data on voter information considered dichotomously: know something or not about the incumbent and the challenger, can name name and associate with party or not, can or cannot say something about the candidates. Demanding a name recall asks more than the ballot asks by way of voter information. Thus questions pushing beyond name to any identification or image associated with the candidates may prove particularly helpful. Second, going beyond past studies, we need some attempt to measure the different kinds and degrees of information. Combining the responses above with the perceptual measures below may provide some preliminary mapping of the various kinds of information constructs available, how they relate to voter choice and to attributes of the respondent and the contest, and how they differ from presidential constructs. Dichotomous measures may mask important effects and different ways voters handle the information problem. Thus one might hypothesize that relative amounts of information to a point helps incumbents and can be related to positive perceptions about them, but that information beyond some critical point begins to be negatively perceived: ie. incumbency and information may be described as a curvilinear function unidentified by past measurement attempts. Third, some pretesting of the order of congressional questions might be undertaken. From experience with earlier surveys, I wonder whether juxtaposition with presidential questions may maximize "don't know" congressional responses. One has, after all, just demonstrated that one knows something about the voting problem and may be less pressed to push for congressional information. Isolating a series of congressional questions on the interview schedule may lead to fewer haven't-any-idea responses. Other efforts to reduce nonresponses might also be suggested.

Questions measuring perceptions about candidates and duplicating presidential questions: We need data measuring perceptions about congressional candidates: thus the open-ended What is liked/disliked about the incumbent and challenger; and questions used at the presidential level to measure issue, party, and candidate perceptions. These two sets of questions alone would be extremely useful in comparing presidential and congressional voting, increasing understanding of party and issue voting beyond the presidential contest, and investigating conditions under which incumbents may be defeated. It would also be helpful, at this point in the questionnaire, if

interviewers could supply, as ballots do, the names of the two candidates-- again trying to avoid "don't know" responses. Judging from past studies, where the names were not supplied, some 50 to 60 percent voters in the sample will not give perceptual responses to the congressional questions.

Questions tracing sources of information about the candidates:

These should be asked specifically for congressional races. Variation in information content and perceptions above may relate to different kinds of information and information-transmission processes, and these in turn may differ with incumbent and challenger status. Questions allowing one to distinguish information available before or only during the campaign, and information as news, advertisement, or endorsement (reference group support, neighborhood lawn signs) would be helpful.

Attempts to disaggregate the national sample: This could at least be raised as a question of feasibility. One reason for the scarcity of congressional election research is the lack of state and district surveys sampling the population that actually can vote in these contests. While state and district characteristics and incumbency status can be coded in from the national samples, the questions should at least be raised whether a national sample could be constructed that could be disaggregated to some state samples. The 1968 CSEP study aggregated 13 state samples into a national sample. The suggestion here is to reverse the process, enormously increasing data for Senate contests.

Despite the simplicity and small number of questions proposed, the above data could begin to address the questions raised initially in the paper and provide the base for a number of different specific studies. From these data, one could address (1) models of the various kinds of information available in congressional contests, (2) conditions under which incumbents are more or less advantaged, (3) differences between presidential and congressional voting, (4) the impact of parties and issue voting for congressional races, (5) information transmission processes and the impact of the campaign, (6) reference group studies. All of these could be done with the present national sample construct. Disaggregating to state samples would only enormously increase the kinds of studies possible; eg. facilitating designs matching "input" to a race-- in terms of campaign strategy or issues raised-- with "output" as measured by voter attitudes and information.

Other questions and kinds of data could also be suggested. This merely illustrates one way we might have large returns for a small number of questions-- in terms of the importance of the incumbency and information questions, their practical and academic implications, and the number of specific studies which could be derived.... Then, of course, one has to start somewhere. Even the legendary elephant researchers got hold of whatever data they could. After the ear, it may be all downhill.