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Memorandum for Conference on Congressional Election Research:  
The Context and Conduct of Congressional Election Campaigns

The suggestions in this memorandum are based on the assumption that many of the "questions concerning citizen information, perceptions, attitudes and contacts which remain unanswered for Senators and Representatives" mentioned in the Fenno-Tufte memorandum will be carefully addressed in the future congressional election surveys. The point I wish to emphasize is the necessity of collecting additional information on the context and conduct of the election campaigns in the sampled states and districts and ~~organizing it to be used in~~ conjunction with the survey items.

Answers to a number of important questions about voting behavior in congressional elections require a substantial amount of information on the political context of each election, the behavior of candidates and supporters, and the issue content of the campaign. This is not a problem in presidential election studies; the campaigns are largely national (at least once the primary season is over) and their salient features are well publicized in the news media. But to understand the effect of congressional campaign events and activities, a significant effort will have to be put into ascertaining what went on in particular campaigns. The basic question here is, of course, what, if any, difference in the behavior of voters can be attributed to the campaign itself?

Let me reveal my own research bias by suggesting, first of all, the necessity of collecting data on the campaign spending patterns of candidates in the states and districts covered by the surveys. I have been investigating the effects of campaign spending (and speculating on the potential effects of campaign finance reforms) on the outcomes of congressional elections and have been frustrated by the problems involved in uncovering the linkages between this particular element of the campaign and the attitudes and behavior of individual voters. Gross spending

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figures are of course available now from the F.E.C., but it is important to know how the money was spent, as well as how much, if we are to have any clear idea of its impact. The present staff of the F.E.C. has expressed interest in learning from political scientists what kinds of information on campaign spending would be most useful to scholars; the commission's budget evidently includes money for preparing reports from their data, and their computer can produce them in almost any form. It may be possible to have detailed campaign spending information prepared by the F.E.C. in a form specifically designed for combination with the survey data. It is a possibility well worth exploring. The important policy questions which might then be addressed are self-evident.

Data on spending would probably be the easiest and least expensive campaign information to acquire, but other kinds of information are equally important: patterns of media use (TV, radio, billboards, telephone banks, mailings, etc.); campaign organization (e.g., use of professionals, party, paid and unpaid workers, and the amount of time they work); the candidate's personal activities. Clearly, this involves the difficult task of determining relevant categories of campaign activities and developing indices measuring the amount of each in a campaign which permit comparison across districts and states. But such data are essential, for example, to evaluating respondents' answers to questions about the nature and sources of information they bring to bear on their voting decision.

Information on issues emphasized in specific campaigns is also essential. A broad categorization of issues as national, local, or personal immediately suggests itself, with more detailed breakdowns within these categories a possibility. Some monitoring of campaign content is required, then, and here again, cross-district measures of the degree of issue emphasis would have to be developed. What kinds of issues do voters respond to? What kinds do they ignore? What connection, if any,

is there between the campaign as pursued by the candidates and the perceptions and behavior of voters? Questions of this sort demand information on the content of individual campaigns.

Somewhat further afield, we might consider gathering antecedent data on the behavior of incumbent candidates running in the states and districts surveyed (as a basis for testing, for example, some of the hypotheses explaining the success rate of incumbents). It would be useful to have some measure of mail flow to and from the congressman's office, the volume of casework handled, the number of trips home to the district, the amount of time spent in the district, the number and staffing of home offices, and efforts to communicate with constituents (use of local radio, TV, Newspapers, newsletters, etc.). All this would be in addition to information on roll call votes and other legislative activities. Antecedent data might also be gathered on nonincumbent candidates--their prior political experience and activities or other characteristics potentially affecting their saliency, for example. Obviously, these are increasingly ambitious suggestions, but they are logical extensions of the idea that voting behavior must be understood within a political context affected by what politicians spend their time and other resources doing.

To be most useful, such information must be combined with properly dovetailing survey questions, and the sampling procedure should be of the sort, mentioned in the Fenno-Tufte memo, which support district by district comparison. In addition, valid measurement of campaign effects requires, minimally, two waves of interviews; more complete panel surveys would be even better. Interviews with the candidates and/or their chief campaign strategists are also suggested by this approach.

It would obviously take a small army of researchers to do all these things (and primary elections haven't even been mentioned). But not everything need be done at once or necessarily directly through the CPS. I have already mentioned

how the campaign spending data might be acquired through the F.E.C. For the other items, a beginning could be made by selecting a relatively small number of states and districts with varying salient characteristics (e.g., with incumbent candidates or open seats; competitive or noncompetitive; urban, suburban, or rural; a regional distribution, etc.) and gathering the most extensive data for these.

In any case, my argument is that expansion of our knowledge of voting behavior in congressional elections and of the connections between candidates, campaigns, and voters will require extensive information on the political context of specific elections and on what goes on in individual campaigns. And, therefore, a survey study which includes such information will be vastly more useful to both scholars and teachers. I look forward to a discussion of these ideas.

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