




the american political science association

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TO: Heinz Eulau, Chair, Board of Overseers, National Election Studies
FROM:  Thomas E. Mann, Assistant Director
RE: Conference on Congressional Election Research

I write to express my interest in attending the conference on Congressional Election Research to be held at the University of Rochester on October 27-28, 1977.

My interest stems from a belief that research on congressional elections has been greatly constrained by the lack of data that address the most interesting questions. Appropriate changes in the sampling design and in the content of the survey instrument of the CPS national election studies could contribute substantially to a blossoming of this important but neglected area of research.

Let me discuss briefly several relevant findings from my own research and the implications I draw from them for the study of congressional elections. First, in order to give you a sense of the substantive interests that prompted this research and of the data used in it, I repeat here the brief introduction I prepared for the full research report.

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"The research reported in these pages grew out of my experience as a political consultant during the 1974 and 1976 congressional elections. As a contributor to the campaign services made available to marginal House incumbents and challengers by the Democratic Study Group, I helped design and implement a program of low-cost, volunteer based, telephone polling of congressional constituencies. The effort was predicated on the belief that candidates could improve their electoral situation by making decisions based on knowledge of public opinion in their districts. Candidates believe that decisions they make prior to and during their campaigns--ranging from the targetting of resources, the development of campaign themes, the handling of volatile issues, the use of mass media, the adoption of a posture toward one's opponent, the coordination of effort and public appeal with their party's candidates for other offices--have important consequences for the numbers of supporters they eventually attract on election day. Moreover, they believe that something relevant to these decisions can be learned from voters' knowledge of and sentiment toward candidates and issues.

"On its face, this candidate perspective is somewhat at odds with the literature of political science which stresses the abysmally low level of public knowledge of congressional candidates. While we know from the research of John Kingdon and the experience of many political consultants that candidates' perception of public opinion is neither necessarily accurate nor free of systematic bias, it is unlikely that politicians would invest heavily and continuously in efforts to tap public opinion when none exists.

"In the course of conducting almost fifty constituency surveys, I acquired the distinct impression that if politicians tend to overestimate who is looking and what they see, political scientists err at the opposite extreme. I was continuously struck by the relatively discriminating view portions of the electorate held of the competing candidates, by the tremendous variation with which new incumbents were able to translate their resource advantage into political support at home, and by the substantial mobilization of support that does occur during election year. At the same time, of course, I noted the importance of factors that were operating independent of public perceptions of the candidates, including party identification and degree of satisfaction with the incumbent Administration.

"Despite a large body of literature on campaigning which chronicles cases of electoral change due to salient issues, personalities, or other circumstances that run counter to local partisan strength and national political forces, political scientists usually dismiss the role of candidate-controlled factors whenever the discussion of congressional elections moves beyond case studies of single congressional districts. Perhaps an overly narrow view of the public's knowledge of congressional candidates has led us to dismiss too quickly the importance of the candidates themselves.

"These thoughts prompted me to re-analyze the data collected in the DSG congressional district surveys. While these data are frail on several counts, they offer clear advantages as well.

"First, the limitations. Each of the surveys was conducted in a way designed to minimize costs and insure rapid completion of the interviewing. This meant compromises had to be made--telephone interviewing, volunteer interviewers, replacements for those in the initial sample unable to be reached, reliance on close-ended questions. Moreover, since congressional district lines often are not contiguous with telephone exchange boundaries, it was impossible to rely on random digit dialing as a sampling technique. The exact methods utilized, the costs incurred by each, and the efforts to insure quality control are discussed in detail in the appendix.

"The surveys were designed to satisfy political, not theoretical objectives. This limits the utility of the questionnaires for academic research. While I was able to include in most of the surveys standard scholarly measures of attitude, identification and behavior, there is some lack of comparability that was candidate imposed.

"A serious limitation is the timing of the surveys. All were conducted prior to the election; we have no post-election report of preferences or behavior. In most cases the last survey in each district was completed two or three weeks before the election, so we have some respondents who were undecided or who might have changed their preferences just prior to the election.

"These limitations are serious, but not crippling. I believe there are several good reasons for proceeding cautiously. The most important is there are no comparable data available which will allow an assessment of candidate influence on voting in congressional elections. In recent years a number of scholars have utilized the Center for Political Studies national election studies to describe the basic contours of congressional voting and to test some theories about the increasing value of incumbency. The use of the election studies in this manner has been appropriate and informative. But the utility of these data for studying congressional candidates is restricted in two ways. First, with the exception of the 1958 election study, candidate image and issue proximity items have not been included in the questionnaires. Moreover, simple candidate recognition and approval measures have been omitted, only the more difficult candidate recall or "saliency" measure included. Second, the national election studies cannot support a robust analysis of local contextual factors in congressional voting. Certainly some analysis of this type can and has been done. Controls for incumbency, partisan balance, region, community type, have served these purposes well. However, where the context is defined by a mix of candidate appeals and local issues, the task is exceedingly difficult. And evidence from aggregate election statistics suggests that the forces for change in congressional elections remain primarily local in origin.

"The candidate surveys allow a direct measurement of the public's knowledge of and response to candidate names, images and positions on issues; of the variability in public response to candidates across marginal districts; of changes in public attitudes toward candidates across time prior to the election; and of the correspondence between candidate actions and public responses. By working with these data, I can preserve a unit of analysis that has important political meaning--the congressional district. Moreover, other "hard" data, e.g. election returns, can be used to validate and interpret findings that emerge from each constituency survey.

"If this research is effectively executed, it should cast new light on our conception of public opinion and voting in congressional elections. This in turn should prompt a more thorough investigation of the issues raised herein, both by the addition of items to the CPS election study questionnaires and by a systematic expansion and methodological upgrading of congressional district surveys."

I learned several things from these marginal district surveys. The public is more knowledgeable about congressional candidates than we have been led to believe. Large numbers of voters have impressions of the candidates, however partial and fragile is the information at hand. Moreover, candidates differ substantially in the content and valence of the response they elicit from the public. Individual voting is very responsive to these perceptions of the candidates--a simple candidate preference model fits the data very well indeed. Party identification independent of candidate preference is a relatively minor factor in congressional voting. Incumbency appears less a constant advantage than a resource that pays rather uneven electoral dividends.

The evidence is equally compelling when the unit of analysis switches from the individual voter to the congressional district. Inter-election swing across congressional districts is not at all uniform; in fact, the heterogeneity of partisan swing has increased dramatically in recent years, quite apart from the advantage of incumbency. Moreover, the forces for change in district returns

can be traced largely to public responses to the candidates.

In view of these findings, it is not hard to understand why presumably safe incumbents profess electoral uncertainty. An ostensibly noncompetitive electoral structure can nonetheless evoke a strong element of elite responsiveness.

The implications of this research for the national election studies are clear. We need to include adequate measures of candidate recognition and reputation, as well as an item on the congressional vote that more closely mirrors the actual choice voters face at the polls. These require that interviewers present respondents with the name of the congressional candidates instead of requiring them to recall the names from memory. Efforts should also be made to develop items that would identify attentive publics on salient local issues.

The inclusion of these items would permit a multivariate analysis of the independent influence of party identification, presidential performance, national issues (such as the economy), local issues, and candidate recognition and reputation. It would also allow us to see what the incumbency advantage means at the level of mass opinion.

We need to remember, however, that the national congressional electorate itself has little political meaning. The most important unit is the congressional district electorate - it directly determines the extent of seat turnover and provides the most salient political cues to incumbents. Thought must be given to changes in the sampling design that would preserve in some way the district as a unit of analysis.