

BOARD OF OVERSEERS

NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES

Report on Conference on Congressional Elections Research

A conference on Congressional Elections Research, sponsored by the Board of Overseers, National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies (The University of Michigan), was held at the University of Rochester on October 27-28, 1977. Chaired by Board Member Professor Richard F. Fenno, Jr., the conference was attended by the following: Alan I. Abramowitz, William and Mary; David W. Brady, Houston; Charles S. Bullock III, Georgia; Robert Erikson, Washington University; Heinz Eulau, Stanford (Board); Morris Fiorina, California Institute of Technology; Linda L. Fowler, Syracuse; Barbara Hinckley, Wisconsin (Madison); Gary C. Jacobson, Trinity; Malcolm Jewell, Kentucky; Henry C. Kenski, Arizona; Samuel Kernell, California (San Diego); Warren L. Kostroski, Wittenberg; James H. Kuklinski, Wichita State; John D. Macartney, Air Force Academy; Thomas E. Mann, APSA; David R. Mayhew, Yale; Arthur H. Miller, Michigan (CPS Staff); Warren E. Miller, Michigan (Principal Investigator); Candice J. Nelson, University of California (Berkeley); Benjamin I. Page, Wisconsin (Madison) (Board); Glenn R. Parker, Miami (Ohio); Samuel C. Patterson, Iowa; Ann Robinson (CPS Staff); Maria Sanchez, Michigan (CPS Staff); John Sprague, Washington University (Board); Walter J. Stone, Grinnell; Eric M. Uslander, Maryland; Robert Weissberg, Illinois (Urbana); Raymond E. Wolfinger, California (Berkeley); Gerald C. Wright, Florida Atlantic.

This was the first in a series of research conferences organized by the Board in its effort to bring the ideas, interests and talents of particular segments of the larger research community to bear on the studies of elections and electoral behavior conducted biennially by the Center for Political Studies. The conference was in many ways experimental, designed to implement the Board's mandate to serve as a bridge between the Center and the research community and to orient the conferees to the opportunities for expanded research on congressional elections. The purposes of the conference were essentially two: First, to explore what degree of consensus might exist among the conferees, as representatives of the research community, with regard to needs and priorities in the field of congressional elections research; and, second, to suggest long-term steps that might be taken in the congressional elections field following the 1978 election.

Apart from the formal proceedings which followed the seminar format, allowing a free flow of conversation, the conference served to bring together for the first time individual scholars who, though acquainted with each other's work, had not met before in an atmosphere of sustained informal discussion rarely possible at larger professional meetings. Much of the formal discussion centered in themes, issues and topics dealt with in working memoranda prepared by the conferees (and also by many others who, because of budget limitations, could not be invited to the conference). Among

these themes, the problem of congressional incumbency or of the "vanishing marginal district" served as a point of departure to specify the data that are needed, and that might be collected by NES/CPS, to test a great variety of hypotheses suggested in both conference memoranda and recent publications. Incumbency proved a convenient starting point because it seems to be a link par excellence between electoral outcomes and legislative outcomes. There is, on the one hand, the problem of understanding the "incumbency effect" on voter attitudes, perceptions and behavior; and there is, on the other hand, the problem of assessing this same effect on the attitudes, cognitions and conduct of congressmen. Some of the round-table discussion was detailed and technical (for instance: what are the advantages and disadvantages of alternative question wording in regard to voters' perceptions of congressmen's issue stands, constituency services, the pork-barrel allocations that may have obtained for the district, or responses to "home style?"). Much of the discussion was broad gauged and general (for instance: how is it possible to compare meaningfully both incumbents and challengers across congressional districts with highly variable contextual properties that challenge the validity of inferences essential to the construction of theory?).

By moving back and forth between technical details and generic concerns, the discussion was enlightened by both broad theoretical assumptions that would permit maximal agreement on research priorities and by an awareness of those methodological difficulties that inevitably constrain an ideal research design. For instance, it was suggested that instead of thinking in dualistic terms of "incumbent and challenger" at one point in time, it is important to realize that incumbency effect is a conceptual artifact, and that it may be more fruitful to inspect the range of empirical coordinates that both determine and limit the relative success or failure of both incumbents and challengers over time. Similarly, sharper conceptual discrimination between voter perceptions of and attitudes toward the Congress as an institution, on the one hand, and of congressmen as individuals, on the other hand, would require a range of new interview questions for testing relevant hypotheses. Given the many complexities associated with major alternatives, a highly rational approach to the trade-offs necessary for the construction of optimal interview schedules was considered essential.

A great deal of the conference discussion centered on analytic issues that arise from a change in the primary sampling unit from the present county level to the congressional district level, a change in sampling already initiated by NES/CPS as a result of suggestions made earlier by the Board of Overseers. The conference participants approved the change in sample format, though they recognized that problems of an analytical sort remain, especially those involving the aggregation of individual responses to the level of the congressional district. (Even with the congressional district as the primary sampling unit, the number of individual interviews per district remains relatively small.) Perhaps the most far-reaching consequence of the shift to the congressional level as the primary sampling unit will follow from the possibility of

assembling at this level of aggregation a portfolio of (non-interview) contextual data that previously were not easily linked to the survey data. A great deal of the discussion therefore involved the strategy of collecting not only conventional census-demographic, aggregate-electoral and congressional roll-call data, but also constituency-relevant data on campaign activities of party or candidate organizations, on mass media of communication, on campaign expenditures, and so on, all of which can be assumed to have some relationship to both voter behavior and the campaign of the competing candidates. In this connection, the problem of testing for the relative impact of national and local issues, and their interaction, was raised.

The sampling problem was again considered in connection with questions of representation raised by those conference participants more interested in the consequences of elections and electoral behavior than their causes. A proposal to oversample in a few districts did not seem feasible because, due to limited resources, this would involve a severe reduction in the total number of districts available for analysis and, therefore, a reduction in the efficiency of the sample as a sample of the national electorate.

There was agreement that congruence between congressmen's and voters' attitudes on issues, as an approach to representation, must be supplemented by questions concerning institutional evaluation, because, as widely pointed out, congressmen are generally more oriented toward national issues than are voters. It is for this reason, also, that the congressman's "home style" may need as much attention as his/her positions on public policy. In this connection the interesting hypothesis was suggested that voters' attitudes toward Congress as an institution may well vary with the home style of the congressman.

This brief report by no means covers all the many worthwhile suggestions for future research on congressional elections that emerged from the conference. Because of the informality and easy interchange that characterized the conference, participants also explored research alternatives and opportunities that might be created, with or without the Board's sponsorship, by cooperative arrangements among scholars. Emphasis was given to more intensive state or substate data collections not possible at this time in connection with the national random probability studies conducted by the Center for Political Studies.

This report also cannot readily convey the sense of intellectual excitement among the participants. There was a sense that the conference marked a new beginning in elections research. Indeed, follow-up activities are being planned by the NES/CPS Board of Overseers as well as by subgroups of conferees. As a first step, the Board has established a ten-person "Standing Committee on Congressional Elections Research," which will undertake research and development planning in the Congressional arena for the 1982 and 1986 elections and beyond. Members appointed at the Board's December meeting for the purpose of designing the 1978 study

include: Richard Fenno, chair; A. Abramowitz, M. Fiorina, B. Hinckley, G. Jacobson, T. Mann, D. Mayhew, G. Parker, R. Wolfinger, and G. Wright. Conferees also agreed to present to the Board their own list of priority questions they would like to see included in the 1978 interview schedule, as well as lists of contextual data they wish to see collected and made part of the final data assembly.

Persons interested in the work of the Board of Overseers and in the follow-up activities of the conference on Congressional Elections Research in particular should write to the Board, Box Z, Stanford, CA. 94305.