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September 23, 1977

Professor Heinz Eulau
Board of Overseers, N.E.S.
P.O. Box Z
Stanford, California 94305

Dear Professor Eulau,

Enclosed is a brief response to the Fenno-Tufte memorandum. I intended a more substantial statement, but I've been caught up in moving, and your letter was only recently forwarded. So, this hasty blurb will have to suffice. I am delighted with the new machinery for developing future election surveys. And given my continuing interest in congressional elections, I would very much like to learn of developments for the 1978 and 1980 surveys.

Sincerely,

Sam Kernell.

Sam Kernell

Enclosure

SEP 29 1977

RESPONSE TO THE FENNO-TUFTE MEMORANDUM

How We Have Come to Study Congressional Elections

Congressional elections have traditionally been viewed as derivative. During presidential elections a swing in the congressional vote has been generally assigned to the winner's coattail. And a subsequent change in the vote at midterm has been attributed to the absence of the coattail. The only noteworthy feature of congressional elections was the stability of the vote. Without the volatility that presidential candidates give presidential elections, congressional voting was the exclusive domain of party identification.

Not until Gerald Kramer's 1971 APSR article on short-term fluctuations in the congressional vote did many scholars appreciate the systematic, if somewhat confined, variability of congressional election results. Today these marginal but politically consequential fluctuations of the vote are the preoccupation of congressional election research. Katz (1976, APSR) demonstrated that a sizable share of the vote swings within congressional districts is produced by nationally located forces. Kramer, Bloom and Price (1976, APSR), and Tufte (1975, APSR) found that the current health of the economy accounted for much of this national influence. Kernell (1977, APSR) and Pierson (1976, ~~APSR~~ AJPS) discovered another systematic, national force in the president's popularity. Beginning with

Kramer's article we have shifted focus from the individual to the aggregate level of analysis. No longer interested in the purely social psychological dimensions of the vote choice, current research is studying the margins of the overall vote. Time-series analysis abounds, threatening to become, as Price observed, a "light industry." We need to recognize, however, that one can study partisan electoral change without abandoning the individual voter.

The Voter Has More to Tell Us

While aggregate, time-series analysis can be highly suggestive, it can hardly be definitive or conclusive until its assumptions are firmly grounded on individual level relationships. One problem is the state of the art. Every study seems controversial and certain to spawn replications which prefer slightly different but consequential assumptions or operational definitions. And econometrics provides no ready solution to some common methodological problems--such as the application of instrumental variables to autoregressive models.

Aside from the technical pitfalls of econometrics, ~~such~~ time series analysis is likely to miss important features of partisan political change. A good example is the relationship between the president's popularity and congressional voting. In a recent study I found that the president's detractors were more likely than his admirers to vote. Moreover, they registered their disapproval in their vote to a greater degree than his admirers registered their approval. This simple asymetry holds a number of implications for time-series analysis which could

(and have) been easily missed. First, the percent preferring Party X, ceteris paribus (i.e., the intercept term), should be lower when it controls the White House. Second, the functional form of the relationship between popularity and vote should be non-linear given the disproportionate weight of negative evaluations and the differential partisan composition of the president's admirers at different levels of popularity. And third, the larger the president's party the stronger should be the relationship between his popularity and the vote.

The 1978 and '80 surveys are ideally timed to allow us to return to individual decision-processes to develop models of electoral change.

What Does the Voter Have to Tell Us and How Do We Get Him to Talk?

The agenda:

1) How does the voter perceive and evaluate the environment? What events and conditions are most important? Are there thresholds below which the conditions go unnoticed and above which they are primary? Is this perception vicariously obtained through communication or experimental? Are negatively and positively judged environmental changes equally relevant to political opinions and behavior?

2) How does the voter translate perceptions/evaluations into partisan choices? What are the available cues and who uses them? . . . party imagery as suggested by Okun (1973, AER)? . . . the president? . . . the incumbent congressman? . . . the party controlling congress? Do some cues apply to certain issues and not to others? Are they equally sensitive to changes in the voters' sentiments?

3) How do the partisan choices, once made, affect elections? Are there net effects or does voting on the issue cancel out? Obviously there are other cues available which do not elicit retrospective judgments. Are such cues (e.g., party identification, incumbency, ideology) more likely to be

employed when the voter is relatively content? And therefore, are swings biased in a negative direction?

Recent time-series studies have not provided convincing models of congressional elections. Only by returning to the dynamics of the vote choice, I suspect, are we likely to make much progress toward understanding electoral change.