



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85721

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

September 22, 1977

Board of Overseers
National Election Studies
P.O. Box Z
Stanford, CA 94305

Dear Sirs:

I have prepared a short memorandum for consideration for the October 27-28 Conference on "Congressional Election Research." Thank you for your attention to my submission.

Sincerely,

Henry C. Kenski
Henry C. Kenski
Associate Professor

HCK/jg

Enclosure

SEP 29 1977



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MEMORANDUM

FROM: Henry C. Kenski, University of Arizona

RE: Memorandum for Conference on Congressional Election Research

My own interest in congressional elections has been a continuing one over the past several years and its direction has been influenced by several experiences. First, I have created aggregate data sets dealing with the impact of economic conditions on elections. The available data on unemployment (rate of and change in the rate) and inflation (general and food price) are matched with district level data from the House for 1952 to 1976. Another data set involves unemployment and House results from 1958-1976 at the state level. Although the more inclusive real disposable personal income per capita used in Tufte's longitudinal study (1975) would have been preferred, it was not used due to a problem of availability. The goal of this research is to introduce cross-sectional findings to the growing body of longitudinal literature on this subject (Kramer, 1971; Stigler, 1973; Okun, 1973; Arcelus and Meltzer, 1975; Goodman and Kramer, 1975; Bloom and Price, 1975; Tufte, 1975; Meltzer and Mellrath, 1975; Fair, 1976; Hibbs, 1976, etc.). Hence I am interested in comparing cross-sectional aggregate findings with the C.P.S. surveys, particularly questions dealing with awareness of economic conditions, self-perceived economic change, and the vote. Second, I was an A.P.S.A.

September 22, 1977

Congressional Fellow in 1975-76 and my Washington experience has sensitized me to the need to use surveys to tap political factors. Since House and Senate offices really appear to be small businesses with respect to electoral activities and the mobilization of voter support, I find Mayhew's analysis of electoral incentives and activities (1974) most persuasive.

The CPS surveys really need to do much more to see to what extent the sundry and extensive activities of congressional actors is perceived, if at all, by voters. Only then will we be able to assess with confidence the causes of the decline of marginal districts or the effect of incumbency. Overall, there are three ideas that should be included among the many ideas discussed at the October conference.

The first concerns the impact of economic conditions on the vote and how to measure the former etc. Here we seem to encounter a dual reality not unlike the Fenno paradox of "we love our congressman but not our Congress." There appears to be a dual reality between aggregate and survey data. Longitudinal aggregate analyses by some political scientists plus conventional wisdom suggest an impact of economic conditions on the vote, subject to a dissent by similar analyses by economists. On the other hand, confirmation from the world of survey research has not been forthcoming. RePass, for example, in an impressive and detailed analysis of the severe recession tainted election of 1958 did not find a strong relationship between economic conditions and the vote (unpublished dissertation, 1965). Yet our longitudinal findings plus conventional interpretation by talented journalists associate adverse economic conditions and the Democratic vote in talking about the "class of '58."

September 22, 1977

The suggestion by Wides (1976) that the effects of self-perceived economic change on political orientations be extended to congressional elections is one avenue of research that should be pursued. It should go beyond efforts to test the existence of such relationships, however, and explore in greater detail if there are any correlates of the various self-perceptions of economic change.

In short, a carefully designed series of questions to tap possible relationships between objective economic condition of respondents as well as their subjective self-perceptions of economic well being should be considered.

The second idea deals with the advantages of incumbency and seeks to see to what extent voters perceive incumbent activities. Here a series of questions need to be formulated to test Mayhew's observations about advertising, credit claiming, and issue posturing. Differences between Senate and House elections should also be pursued. We need to identify both direct and indirect contacts that voters have had, if any, with their member of Congress. Have they been helped to resolve a problem (social security check, pension, etc.), or have they heard of any member of their family, or friends who have been assisted etc.? Ferejohn's effort (1977) to operationalize Mayhew by examining if there has been an overall increase in the level of recognition of the incumbent and the relative level of recognition of incumbents versus challengers is a step in the right direction, although it only taps the tip of the iceberg. The limitations are apparent when he himself ends up concluding that there is an independent incumbency effect despite the lack of increase in incumbent name recognition, etc. What accounts for the increased incumbency effect?

September 22, 1977

We need a more effective and comprehensive operationalization of Mayhew and also Fiorina (1977).

The third idea is to emphasize the importance of adding contextual data and other supplementary data to increase the usefulness of the basic survey data collection. This is part of the National Science Foundation grant, and it should be given serious attention. In the nineteen fifties, the S.R.C. found that newspaper data were not so useful. Today it would find that this is true of some newspapers in some districts, but not true of others. Much depends on the newspaper and the district, but some newspapers are extremely useful as to candidate issue postures, credit claiming, advertising, strategy and tactics, etc. In addition to media coverage to identify salient state or local political factors, demographic information on the state or district (including data on recent economic conditions) is desirable. Finally, information on the comparative resource balance between the two candidates would also be useful.

What is their total financial base? Where does their money come from? How do they spend their money (electronic media, newspapers, paying campaign workers, voter identification, voter registration etc.)? Does either candidate have important group assistance (organized labor, the N.R.A., etc.) in critical area of volunteer support or manpower for mailings, voter contact/registration activities, etc.?