

Unanswered Questions, Unasked Questions  
in Congressional Election Research

A Memorandum to the Board of Overseers,  
National Election Studies

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Memorandum

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The increasing invulnerability of congressional incumbents to electoral defeat has sparked a resurgence of interest in congressional elections among students of voting behavior. The work which has been done to date is overwhelmingly agreed on one point: incumbents have an advantage in congressional elections. Moreover, researchers have found that this "incumbency advantage" or "incumbency effect" increased during the mid and late 1960s (Erickson, 1972; Mayhew, 1974). However, while we know that incumbents have both an electoral and a perceptual advantage, we know very little about where this advantage comes from and how it operates in practice. It is to a more specific explication and understanding of the incumbency effect that this memorandum is addressed.

It is a well-established fact that incumbents are better known than nonincumbents. Yet how this knowledge of incumbents is learned by constituents is not so easily discerned. Researchers have found that despite the increase in congressional perquisites during the 1960s and 1970s, congressmen are no more well-known to their constituents now than they were twenty years ago (Cover, 1976; Ferejohn, 1977; Nelson, 1977). This anomaly suggests that either congressmen's efforts to increase their visibility among their constituents are not working, or that we are inadequately measuring how aware constituents are of their congressmen. I will argue that the

latter statement is true, and that we need more information to accurately ascertain the veracity of the first.

Several pieces of research suggest that our present measure of a respondent's awareness of incumbent candidates is in fact a measure of a respondent's ability to remember the name of an incumbent in an interview situation, rather than a measure of the respondent's recognition of the incumbent. Ferejohn found that in 1964, 1966, 1968, and 1970 incumbency had a significant effect on the voting decision once awareness of the congressional candidates was controlled (Ferejohn, 1977). I found that voters who could recall neither party's congressional candidate responded to incumbency just as did voters who knew both candidates; in both instances defection was least when a voter's own party's candidate was the incumbent and was greatest when the other party's candidate was the incumbent (Nelson, 1977). Finally, Abramowitz found that despite the fact that only 34 percent of his respondents could recall the incumbent's name in an interview, when given the incumbent's name 95 percent of the respondents said they had heard or read something about him (Abramowitz, 1975).

While the ability of a respondent to recall the name of an incumbent is surely one measure of the respondent's awareness of the incumbent, I think the ability to recognize the incumbent's name indicates a more rudimentary awareness of the incumbent. We would expect anyone who could recall the incumbent's name to also recognize his name when presented with it,

but I would guess that not everyone who recognized the name could also recall it in an interview.

A measure of the number of respondents who recognize an incumbent's name is important for two reasons. First, if the most basic aim of the increases in congressional perquisites is to make incumbents more familiar to their constituents, then the first indication of increased familiarity would be a rise in the number of constituents who recognized the incumbent's name. Indeed, while we know that the number of respondents who can recall the name of their incumbents has not increased with the increases in congressional mailings, travel allowances, and staff, it may be that there has been an increase in constituent recognition of the incumbent's name. Second, in light of our concern with voting in congressional elections, it may be that lacking other information, simple recognition of the incumbent's name on the ballot may lead constituents to vote for the incumbent. In either case, it seems well worth our time to find out how many respondents are familiar enough with their congressman to recognize him when given his name.

While we need to know to what extent constituents recognize, as well as recall, the name of their incumbent, congressman, we also need much more information about the knowledge constituents possess about incumbents. Mayhew argues that congressmen engage in three types of activities, advertising, credit-claiming, and position-taking, to enhance the likelihood of their re-election (Mayhew, 1974). Yet we

have no evidence to determine how effective these congressional activities are in establishing favorable attitudes toward incumbents. We need to find out how much constituents know about their congressmen, how they obtain such information, how constituents evaluate their congressmen, and which incumbent activities lead to positive evaluations and which to negative.

If we accept the argument that recognition of an incumbent candidate's name constitutes the most basic level of awareness of the candidate, then we can suggest a series of questions to determine what other general knowledge about the incumbent respondents have. For example, if constituents recognize the incumbent's name, do they also recognize the name as that of the incumbent congressman from their district? Do respondents know such information as the incumbent's party identification, length of time in office, either generally or specifically, demographic characteristics such as age, sex, race and religion, and general ideological persuasion?

Once we determine the general level and amount of information about incumbents among their constituents, we can examine the extent to which constituents have specific knowledge about incumbents. Such specific knowledge would, in effect, tell us how successful congressional credit-claiming and position-taking efforts are. We would like to know how informed constituents are on the incumbent's positions on

issues, and how extensive such knowledge is. Secondly, we would like to know to what extent constituents either take advantage of or are aware of an incumbent's casework activities. For example, do constituents seek help with governmental problems from their congressmen, or do they know people who seek such help? Do constituents perceive the federal grants and aid to the district as the responsibility of the district's congressman? Fiorina has argued that "a lesser proportion of congressional effort is now going into programmatic activities and a greater proportion into pork-barrel and casework activities. As a result, today's congressmen make relatively fewer enemies and relatively more friends among the people of their districts" (Fiorina, 1977). This may well be true, but its veracity can only be determined once we know to what extent constituents are aware of the pork-barrel and casework activities of their congressmen.

While we need to know the extent of general and specific knowledge constituents possess about their incumbent congressmen, we also need to know how incumbents are perceived by their constituents. Stokes and Miller found that "to be perceived at all is to be perceived favorably" (Stokes and Miller, 1962). Yet Hinckley, Hofstetter and Kessel found that when respondents specifically mentioned incumbency, the responses tended to be negative. (Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel, 1974). Do constituents, as Fiorina suggests, opt for a known quantity, the incumbent, rather than risk voting for the potential evils of an unknown challenger (Fiorina, 1977)? Or is

incumbency, per se, negatively evaluated, while individual incumbents are positively perceived? We would also like to know which characteristics and activities of the incumbent lead to positive evaluations and which lead to negative evaluations. For example, do case-work and pork-barrel activities create positive attitudes toward the incumbent, while issue positions are sources of potential negative attitudes? Does the length of service of the incumbent in Congress lead to favorable or unfavorable evaluations among his constituents? Are demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, race and religion positively or negatively perceived? Certainly use of the master code items for congressional candidates would help us answer some of these questions.

The questions suggested above touch on only one aspect of congressional elections which needs further exploration. A second area of research concerns the relative importance of such information to voters in making their voting choices. Given that one of our concerns is the effect of incumbency of voting in congressional elections, we need to know how important incumbency is as a "cue" to voters. Cover, Ferejohn and I have all speculated that incumbency has become a more important voting cue, and party identification a correspondingly less important cue, in congressional elections in recent years (Cover, 1976; Ferejohn, 1977; Nelson, 1977). Such speculation raises several questions. First, if both incumbency and party identification are considered long-term forces in congressional

elections, are incumbency and party identification alternative and competing voting cues, or are they additive and complimentary cues? Do voters rely on either incumbency or party identification in making their electoral decisions, or does incumbency provide information in addition to party identification? Second, if incumbency and party identification are alternative voting cues, what factors determine which cue guides voting choice? Is incumbency more important to voters who lack strong partisan affiliations (Nelson, 1977)? What is the relationship between the amount and content of information about the incumbent a voter possesses and his use of incumbency as a voting cue? We need to explore the relative importance that voters assign to incumbency and party identification, and to examine the factors which influence the use of these two cues.

Finally, we need to study the relative importance of incumbency vis-a-vis short-term forces in congressional elections. For example, it may be that the importance of incumbency as a voting cue is inversely related to the number and saliency of short-term forces in a congressional election. We may find that incumbency is more important in mid-term elections, which lack the stimuli of a Presidential campaign, than in presidential-year elections. Similarly, we may find that incumbency is more important in the less visible, more frequent House elections than in Senate elections. In short, we need to examine the relative importance of incumbency and other long and short-term variables to congressional voting, both within



individual election years and over time.

In this memorandum I have set forth several unanswered questions with respect to the impact of incumbency on congressional elections. I have argued that we need more information about both the knowledge which constituents possess about incumbent congressmen and the impact of such information on congressional voting choices. Obviously there are many other equally pressing questions about congressional elections which demand our attention. Yet because of the present debates in both academic and non-academic circles over the advantages of incumbency in congressional elections, I think it behooves us to turn our attention to these questions.

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