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Board of Overseers
National Elections Studies
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Dear Sir:

I would like to submit the enclosed memorandum ("The Content of Congressional Evaluations") for possible inclusion in the agenda of business for the conference on "Congressional Election Research" to be held at the University of Rochester. I appreciate the attention and consideration which my short memorandum will receive.

Yours truly,



Glenn R. Parker
Associate Professor

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

THE CONTENT OF CONGRESSIONAL EVALUATIONS

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The inclusion of a series of items designed to probe the criteria used in popular evaluations of Congress would generate data useful in several areas. Although we have begun to understand the dynamics of attitudes toward Congress, there has been little systematic study of the content of evaluations, or their impact. This has been due largely to the lack of questionnaire items designed specifically to probe the underlying dimensions of institutional evaluations. The data generated by such items would be useful in the study of shifts in evaluations of Congress and the presidency. These data would also aid in the conceptual clarification of the content of evaluations. Finally, knowledge of the content of congressional evaluations may help in explaining the incumbency effect. The purpose of this brief memorandum is to illustrate the potential value of analyzing the content of evaluations in the study of congressional elections.

I. SHIFTS IN EVALUATIONS OF CONGRESS

Previous studies of both presidential and congressional popularity have focused on aggregate shifts in popularity (Mueller, 1973; Parker, 1977). I have found that congressional popularity responds to many of the same forces which Mueller finds influencing presidential popularity: Public dissatisfaction with Congress tends to increase with deterioration in economic conditions, and with the election of active-positive presidents. Further, congressional popularity rises during international crises as the public rallies to the support of the political system (Parker, 107-108).

What we have been unable to do thus far is to examine the nature of the aggregate changes in popularity. While presidential and congressional popularity respond to similar forces, there is evidence that orientations toward Congress and the presidency are influenced by the distinctive nature of the institutions themselves:

...the greater accessibility of Congress, and its responsiveness to citizen mobilization, has greater appeal for the active citizen concerned with personal representation. The autonomous nature of the presidency, on the other hand, attracts the more passive individuals who are less concerned with the independence of political elites from constituent opinion (Parker, 1974, pp. 38-39).

Examination of the content of evaluations may further clarify shifts in institutional popularity by indicating the objects, or sources, of negative or positive evaluations. We may be able to understand more fully why the election of a positive-active president serves to depress congressional popularity, or exactly what influence the state of the economy exerts on institutional evaluations. In the process, we may also identify those aspects of congressional politics and performance which are most salient to the public.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In order to understand institutional evaluations, it is necessary to understand what such evaluations mean to the citizen. An open-ended series of questions would permit the examination of bases of assessments of Congress. Knowledge of these bases can enhance our understanding of the perceptions and criteria which enter assessments of congressional performance.

Study of the content of evaluations can also reveal salient aspects of congressional performance which structure evaluations. It is clear that the

public is less aware of the actions of Congress than the actions of the president. In explaining this phenomenon, it has been noted that Congress is a complex institution which receives less media attention than the presidency (Parker, 1976). In-depth examination of congressional evaluations may lead to an understanding of the types of actions in the congressional process which are salient to the public. In so doing, we may further illuminate sources of public inattentiveness to Congress.

Support for political institutions and the nature of support (specific or diffuse) have been topics which have interested political scientists. Evaluations may be conceptualized as displaying either diffuse support (generalized sentiments toward the political institution) or specific support (orientations based upon the specific actions of the political institution). Earlier work which I have done seems to suggest that evaluations are a form of specific support. That is, evaluations tap specific objects of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with Congress. This research indicated that more than two of every five respondents mentioned the policy actions of Congress as a basis for evaluation.

 Table 1 about here

These evaluations appear to focus on orientations toward: Congressional action with respect to domestic and foreign policy; legislative-executive accord; aspects of the congressional environment; and the treatment of groups within the legislative process. In short, the proposed questions may help to clarify whether evaluations continue to reflect specific support.

Finally, the stability and specificity of criteria used in evaluations could be examined over time. A longitudinal study of the content of con-

gressional evaluations could illuminate shifts in criteria as well as shifts in the saliency of certain criteria within segments of the electorate. Such an examination could determine the electoral impact (e.g. turnout in congressional elections, partisan defections, defeat of incumbents) of shifts in criteria within different sociological groups.

III. TOWARD AN EXPLANATION OF INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

One of the recent trends in congressional politics has been incumbency advantage in elections. Over 80% of all incumbents are returned to Congress. This, of course, has a significant impact on the operation of Congress as well as the type of legislation produced. Such factors as the prerequisites of congressional office (e.g., newsletters, media coverage, trips to the district) have been employed in explaining the electoral advantage enjoyed by congressional incumbents. A clue to the incumbency advantage may rest in the study of the criteria which citizens use in evaluating congresspersons.

The evaluation of members of Congress on the basis of criteria which are likely to place incumbents in a favorable light may provide them with an electoral edge. Aside from a few Representatives with regional or national prominence, district service is likely to be the most visible product of a member's congressional activity. (Certainly the emphasis placed on district service by members of Congress would seem to suggest this.) Furthermore, it is likely that district service is one of the more salient aspects of the congressional process for constituents. In fact, a sizable segment of the populace interpret legislative responsibilities in exactly these terms -- serving the interest of one's constituents (Davidson, 1970).

Table 2 illustrates the criteria utilized in popular evaluations of a Representative's service to the district.

Table 2 about here

These data suggest that evaluations of the Representative which focus on district service tend to be favorable. Perhaps the only information which most citizens receive about their Representative concerns his/her service to the district, or individual constituents. While the source of the evaluations is not evident, one point is clear: Evaluations which focus on the district service provided by Representatives tend to be positive. Such positive evaluations seem likely to generate electoral support.

The problem with the above data is that there is a specific reference to "serving the district" in the text of the question which might have inadvertently biased the question to emphasize constituency service. The inclusion of a series of questions designed to probe evaluations may serve to clarify the importance of district service in the evaluation of members of Congress. If district service is found to be one of the most important criteria, this finding may help to explain the incumbency advantage. For if service to the constituency is high valued and the prerequisites of office permit the incumbent to (1) better serve his district and (2) publicize that service, then such service is likely to enhance the electoral prospects of the incumbent.

CONCLUSION

The content of congressional evaluations will generate useful data relevant to congressional election analysis. Analyses of the content of these evaluations can supply information necessary for understanding the nature of popular evaluations of Congress and its members. Moreover, such study may further clarify shifts in congressional popularity. In the process, greater conceptual and empirical clarification of the meaning of congressional evaluations can be obtained. The content of evaluations of representatives may also enhance our understanding of the electoral security enjoyed by incumbents.

TABLE 1
BASES OF EVALUATIONS OF CONGRESS

BASES OF EVALUATION	N	PERCENT	FAVORABLE	UNFAVORABLE
POLICY				
Domestic Policy (Actions)	634	40.1%	53.8%	46.2%
Foreign-Defense Policy	75	5.7	34.7	65.3
LEGISLATIVE-EXECUTIVE RELATIONS				
Presidential Support	43	2.7	72.1	27.9
Presidential Opposition	46	2.9	56.5	43.5
CONGRESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT				
Congressional Style and Pace	140	8.9	37.9	62.1
Congressional Ethics	33	2.1		100.0
Congressional Self-Seeking	47	3.0		100.0
GROUP TREATMENT				
"Other" Reference	88	5.6	27.3	72.7
Repeat of Closed-Ended Question	165	10.4		
Don't Know (Specified)	41	2.6		
Not Ascertained	211	13.4		
Total Responses	1,581	100.0		

TABLE 2

BASES OF EVALUATIONS OF THE REPRESENTATIVE

BASES OF EVALUATION	N	PERCENT	FAVORABLE	UNFAVORABLE
POLICY				
Vague Policy	100	6.2%	69.0%	31.0%
Specific Policy	41	2.5	46.3	53.7
GROUP TREATMENT	81	5.0	58.0	42.0
CONSTITUENT SERVICE				
District Service	354	21.9	73.7	26.3
Constituent Assistance	26	1.6	100.0	
District Conditions	34	2.1	91.2	8.8
Informs Constituents	212	13.1	17.9	82.1
PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES				
Personal Characteristics	207	12.8	83.6	16.4
Reputation	118	7.3	94.9	5.1
Personal Acquaintance	13	0.8		
"Other" Reference	4	0.3	50.0	50.0
Repeat of Closed-Ended Question	34	2.1		
Don't Know (Specify)	34	2.1		
Not Ascertained	361	22.3		
Total Responses	1,619	100.0		

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