

MEMORANDUM

August 30, 1977

TO: Board of Overseers, National Election Studies

FROM: Samuel C. Patterson, University of Iowa

SUBJECT: Five Problems of Congressional Politics in  
Search of Survey Data

There are five particularly troublesome problems of congressional representation which I would like to see illuminated by appropriate entries in the interview schedules and by special sampling in the 1978 congressional election project. These problems are inter-related, but I do not in this memorandum seek to spin out the connections or develop a theoretical rationale.

1. Problem of Participation. In regard to popular participation, the striking thing about congressional elections is the enormous proportion of citizens who apparently are not involved in congressional elections at all, especially at the mid-term (recall that the turnout in 1974 was 36 percent). In congressional elections, it is not so much voting but nonvoting which needs to be explained. And, the participation problem is more vexing in the primaries in which almost all congressional candidates are nominated. People stay away from congressional politics in droves. Why? Of course, we political scientists have been able to offer reasons for low participation in congressional electoral politics. But we have not developed probing survey data with which we could account for participation or lack of it from the perspective of the adult citizen. Although structural and contextual elements are understood to some extent, our understanding of participation in congressional elections would be enriched if we could further penetrate voters' motivations, salience, awareness, predispositions, and bases of choice. Special attention needs to be given to the abstainers. When we study political participation in general, we have a natural proclivity to focus the burden of our attention on those who participate. Here, I think we need to preoccupy ourselves with the nonparticipants. Learning about them may help us to understand other important things, such as why Congress as an institution is so impoverished in citizens' esteem and why ordinary sample survey data show such ignorance about small congressional facts. But I do not mean to suggest that we should not focus attention on participants in congressional elections. We already know them to be something of a special breed, as compared to the role which congressional voters play, and to do this we will need to have a good grasp of who they are and why they bother to vote. And, we will of course want to learn as much as we can about why they made the candidate choices they made.

2. Problem of Response to a Collectivity. We are naturally interested in the affective orientations of people regarding congressmen and Congress. Much of the academic and journalistic discourse about support, efficacy, trust, and confidence is a morass. Presumably, if the "crisis of confidence" were as severe as some of the data and most of the interpretation suggest, it would be a wonder that Congress has been able to survive

SEP 26 1977

as a viable political body. We need more sensitive and extensive data on citizens' attitudes and orientations toward Congress. We need to know why so many people seem to give Congress low grades; we need to know what these grades mean to those who give them; and we need to know what, in their estimation, Congress could do to get better marks. Are people aware of and somehow sensitive to congressional activity? Are they sensitive in their evaluations to congressional processes, or reforms of congressional practices? A goodly number of people who have the grossest misconceptions of what Congress is are, nonetheless, perfectly capable of giving interviewers an evaluation of its effectiveness. How do they do this?

We say that people "love their congressman but hate their Congress," but this is just a manner of speaking, not to be taken literally. Congressmen are variously loved, and few people really hate Congress. But Congress is hard to love partly because it is a large, collective organization. Accordingly, we need pretty detailed probes of citizens' imageries of this entity, so that we can identify complexity of responses and sources of them. I think we will have to do this so as to minimize reification or personification of that entity, and so as to get beneath general norms which sanction the constitutional order but do not plumb how some people come to be favorably disposed to congressional government and others are obstreperous. Representation in a collective body of some kind characterizes the polity of a goodly chunk of human history. We can study why this persists by sensitive and sophisticated probing of the meaning of collective representation to ordinary people (or lack of it).

3. Problem of Incumbency. We really are astonished at the incredibly high incumbency rate. There are, of course, textbook reasons, and they are plausible enough. But reasons, largely in terms of the advantages of incumbents and the electoral context, are not very satisfying. Do those who vote in congressional elections respond differently to incumbents than to challengers? Do incumbents systematically behave differently than challengers, in the perspectives of voters? How do the advantages of incumbency play out in effects on voters themselves? Ideally, we should interview people in general, and both incumbent and challenger candidates. With data for candidates we could analyze the behavior of voters (and those who are not activated as well) as that behavior is affected by the activities, strategies, styles, and policy positions of the candidates running for the office. Then, we might have a better grip on why they don't "throw the bastards out." Are incumbents re-elected because those who survive recruitment screening represent their constituents' wishes and desires better than other potential representatives could, or better than people think they could?

4. Problem of Identifying "Constituency." If we are going to pursue analysis of representation which calls us to link the attitudes and behavior of individual congressmen with the proclivities of people in their districts, we need very badly to sharpen our knowledge of "constituency." Fenno has classified constituencies through perceptive interviews with a small number of congressmen; these insights need to be brushed onto a larger canvas. In this general enterprise, it seems to me it would be desirable to think in terms of developing oversized samples in sampled congressional districts, so as to get district-specific data on attentive constituents and the structure of constituencies. At the same time, in the oversample districts an abundance

of policy-attitude data could be gathered for a full-blown replication with finer constituency-tuning of the Miller-Stokes linkage analysis. We cannot continue for the next twenty years, as in the past twenty, to make generalizations about American political representation from a single-shot study grounded upon a tentative and somewhat flimsy sample of constituents. Furthermore, we need to know more about constituents' conceptions of the constituency, so that we could be in a position to relate these conceptions to citizens' general perceptions and cognitions about representative government and politics.

5. Problem of Contexts. We know that voting behavior is not a pristine individual act, but rather that it occurs in a configuration in which contextual variables have causal importance. A congressional election study is obviously an excellent vehicle for analysis of such variables. Such factors as political competitiveness, campaign spending, or economic conditions can be analyzed as they affect congressional voting behavior. It would be very desirable to gather contextual data---data for congressional districts---so that these data could be used along with the individual survey data.

There are, of course, many possibilities of things to be learned from an omnibus congressional election study, and, even more, a series of such studies. But I think these five problems represent major clusters of ignorance and dismay. It would be good to have them tidied up early on.