

MEMORANDUM

Considerations for Research on Congressional Elections

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My comments here on the study of congressional elections fall into two areas. The first section argues that major approaches to studying voting in congressional elections are likely to have underestimated the linkage between constituency policy preferences and congressional behavior. The second section offers still another explanation for the rise of the incumbency factor in House elections.

Voter Decision Making

Evaluations of congressional elections as a meaningful democratic institution seem to rest in large part on assessments of the quality of voter decisions in House and Senate elections. Voters are not very attentive or informed about the candidates in congressional elections and this has led to the conclusion that policy representation, to the extent that it occurs, is due to congressmen's mistaken perception that their records are a major factor in voters' minds.

An alternative strategy is to examine whether voters tend to actually vote for candidates whose policy positions they prefer. It is possible for voters to make choices that are consistent with their policy interests without being very attentive or informed. Two general factors are particularly important here: retention of unnecessary information and the two-step flow of information.

Representation in elections demands that people vote for the candidate who will do more for their interests, but it does not require citizens to remember the names and full reasons for all their electoral decisions. Thus, when voters are chastised because most cannot recall the names of their representatives, we use a criterion that is unnecessarily strict. Recognition of the name with a valence is all that is required for reasonably rational voting--particularly when that valence is, on the average, consistent with the voters' interests.

Just as forgetting a congressman's name does not mean people have necessarily made a poor decision, so the inability to cite specific issue information is not sufficient evidence to conclude a lack of an issue basis for voting in congressional elections. People may hear or see things about a representative that affect how they feel about him. Most of this is likely to be forgotten, with time, but the impact of that information, a changed attitude, is essentially the same as if a person had needlessly retained all the information they ever had.

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Another process that contributes to underestimating the policy basis of voting in congressional elections is the two-step flow of information. Individuals may well vote primarily on the basis of cues from significant others. They cast ballots without any personal assessment of the candidates, but they nevertheless may well tend to vote for candidates closer to their preferences. The point of both forgetting and cue-taking is that representatives may well be more bound to the policies preferred by their constituencies than is suggested by the meager issue content in the electorate's images of their representatives.

Finally, the prominent explanatory power of party and incumbency in voting in congressional elections should not be interpreted as evidence of a lack of linkage between constituents and representatives. There is ample evidence that party is a generally very good cue to a legislator's roll call behavior on a variety of issues, and incumbency is, under the seniority system, a rough indicator of a representative's power or effectiveness in Congress. Beyond this, however, issues do not need to surpass party in explanatory power to insure an effective representational linkage. Rather they only need to be important enough that rational vote-seeking congressmen will not ignore the important interests of their districts.

The Decline of Challengers

The rising advantage of incumbency in House elections over the last twenty years has attracted a lot of attention. Part of this interest is due to the important implications this has for a decreasing responsiveness of the membership of the House to changes in the public's relative support for the parties. Part of the interest in the decline of the marginals may also be due to the considerable challenge in explaining the phenomena.

To oversimplify somewhat, there are currently at least four explanations for the incumbents' increased electoral margins: (1) the decline of party as a cue for voting (Erikson, Burnham, Ferejohn), (2) reapportionment (Tufte), (3) increased office prerequisites that give congressmen a greater advantage over their challengers, (Mayhew and Cover), and (4) changes in the district "style" of incumbents from policy advocates to ombudsmen (Fiorina and Fenno). Each of these is highly plausible, but none have been empirically demonstrated to account for the rising advantage of incumbency. My purpose here is to suggest another undemonstrated hypothesis, that of the decline of the challengers.

The electoral advantage of the incumbent is not an attribute of the individual representative, but rather of the voters' choice between two candidates. It is reasonable to consider the possibility that the attractiveness of incumbents has remained relatively constant and it is characteristics of challengers that have changed.

If the opposition has gotten weaker, then we would indeed find incumbents winning by larger margins. While a logical possibility, is there any reason to seriously entertain such a hypothesis? Three factors will be briefly discussed here that lend plausibility to the argument.

First, strong challengers are more likely to avoid challenging an incumbent if the chances of winning are perceived to be very small. With many districts competitive in the forties and fifties, challengers, often losing by just a few percentage points, could be encouraged. However, the actual rate of defeats of incumbents even in these years was quite low, so that over time attractive challengers are more likely to realize the difficulties of unseating an incumbent and hence may be more hesitant about incurring the costs of running a campaign that might keep the district competitive by our measures but would not send the challenger to Washington. As this occurs, and the most attractive potential challengers do not run, the way is opened up for weaker candidates. The poorer showing of weaker candidates against incumbents would tend to reinforce perceptions of the incumbents' electoral strength. Attractive candidates will tend to be those who have the most to lose in waging a challenge, and hence may well wait for an open seat before running for office. In this way the incumbents' advantage would be self-fulfilling and would increase over time.

Potential contributors who would like the benefits of access are also likely to be affected by the general perception that incumbents cannot be defeated. Thus, the challenger may find obtaining campaign support more difficult now than was the case for their counterparts in the past.

A second factor suggesting weaker challengers in recent years pertains to the weakened position of formal party organizations in recruiting and supporting candidates. Reforms of the patronage system and expansion of the primaries have decreased the parties' influence in the electoral process.

In the vacuum left by declining party control, there has been a growth of candidate centered organizations. Challengers in the past, to the extent that they could tap into experienced and ongoing campaign organizations, were in a better position to begin and to wage an effective campaign. With the atrophy of party organizations potential challengers have to rely more completely on their own resources in beginning and managing their campaigns. Hence, the costs of making an effective challenge are greater and the chances of success are poorer. The incumbent, in contrast, may carry his organization through from one election to the next with little problem and therefore begins at quite a greater advantage than was probably the case when the opposition party organization had a stronger hand in selecting and supporting candidates and their campaigns.

The third factor contributing to weaker challenges to the incumbent is the rise of the amateur party activists. Party "professionals" are more likely to view policy questions and ideology as a means to the greater goal of winning office. Amateurs are more often involved in politics because of their strong policy and ideological preferences. For many amateurs losing with a candidate who shares the amateur's ideological position is preferable to winning with a candidate who shares only a party label.

The consequences of more amateur ideologues is likely to be challengers who are taking more ideologically extreme positions than a Downsian convergence theory would prescribe. Moderate challengers would tend to be shutout in the nomination process. With interest group access-buying money largely captured by the incumbent, potential challengers are likely to have to turn to ideological amateurs for support. Such financial support, however, has the price of forcing ideological stances that are probably distant from the preferences of most voters. In contrast, incumbents are much less at the mercy of party amateurs because they can draw on the other less ideological sources of support that are more available to incumbents than their challengers.

The primaries work against moderate challengers even if they can get the resources to begin an effective campaign. Primary voters are less moderate than the general electorate, and this is probably especially true for the minority party. Thus, winners of minority party primaries are not likely to be the strongest possible candidates in general elections.

The suggestion here is that the Goldwater and McGovern candidacies are not isolated presidential level phenomena. Rather, it seems likely that such ideological candidacies are related to the rise of amateur activists, and that these activists have probably had a similar, if less dramatic, impact on the nominations of challengers in congressional contests in the last fifteen years.

The single overall prescription that comes out of the ideas presented here is for a closer assessment of the electoral choices offered to voters in congressional elections. To understand changes in the behavior of voters over time we must identify and measure changes in the nature of contests for Congress. In particular, there are at least three types of data that will serve this end.

1. Information on candidates' and voters' policy positions. Beyond just relative liberalism and conservatism information on issue area saliency and issues emphasized in campaigns would be most useful.

Perceptions by the local media and other elites of the candidates would be particularly helpful

in determining how individual congressional contests are being presented to or defined for the electorates.

At the individual level it would be most useful to repeat the 1958 open-ended candidate image questions in 1978. Changes in the distributions in content categories are important. For example, the style hypothesis would predict a drop in the issue content of perceptions and my challenger hypothesis would suggest an increase of the issue content in images of challengers.

2. A measure of candidate attractiveness is necessary to test the ideas presented here. This might be accomplished by determining the association of candidate attributes with electoral success.

Attributes might include measures of achievement in the private sector, degree of prior public experience, as well as the presentation of the candidate through campaign literature or the media.

3. Greater attention to congressional campaigns. The correlation of the Republican vote in contested House elections between 1972 and 1974 is less than .6. Thus, there are many significant ideosyncratic factors. One aspect that is now more amenable to analysis, thanks to recent reforms, is the effects of campaign expenditures. Careful analysis of the amount and utilization of expenditures as well as the employment of supporters and the media has barely been touched.

A second important aspect of campaigns is the role of group and newspaper endorsements. Erikson has suggested that newspaper endorsements of presidential candidates in 1964 had a rather clear effect. With the public having even less information in congressional elections endorsements may have an even larger impact. It would certainly be possible to do a study to see if newspapers have increased their endorsements of incumbents over time.

Related Research

Electoral Choice in America: Image, Party and Incumbency State and National Elections (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Institute for Research in Social Science, 1974).

"Constituency Response to Congressional Behavior: The Electoral Impact of the House Judiciary Committee Impeachment Votes,"
Western Political Quarterly (forthcoming, September 1977).

Current Work: Examination of the effects of candidates' issue strategy in House elections. The data are from the 1974 CBS Congressional Candidate Poll.