

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF ISSUES IN
CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

Eric M. Uslaner
Department of Government and Politics
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

There has been an increasing interest in the study of issue voting, representation, and linkage politics in Congressional elections in the last few years. The most widely used data base has been the Miller-Stokes representation study, done under SRC/CPS auspices; a smaller group of scholars, who have access to the data, have worked with a 1966 data set of opinions on three similar policy areas to the Miller-Stokes design but on which there is complete data on all major-party candidates for both the House and the Senate. This latter data set was collected for the NBC News Election Unit in 1966 by Congressional Quarterly. There is also a 1972 data set on candidate positions compiled by CBS News, but it is unavailable to scholars and there is not even much information on how extensive the data set is.

Each of the available data sets has its limitations. The Miller-Stokes data set is two decades old, has problems with sample sizes in the various constituencies, and contains data on only a subset of candidates for the House and the Senate. The 1966 data set does not have data on how members perceive constituency opinion, nor does it even have data on such constituency opinion itself. This latter data set also requires the leap of faith that members' roll call positions are the same conceptual variable as their positions on the various

issues. For the members of the 89th House, Sullivan and O'Connor (in their 1972 APSR article) indicate that this is in general not problematic; however, there are several interesting deviant cases which Sullivan and I are examining as part of a book-length project.

In our study of the electoral effects of issue positions in 1966, Sullivan and I estimated constituency opinion from SRC/CPS national surveys by the Weber-Munger simulation technique. A refined version of the simulation technique will be employed as we move from the forthcoming article to the book. However, the candidate data set did pose a particular problem for us in the initial article: What question from the SRC/CPS study ought we to choose as representative of constituency opinion. The elite data nicely scaled into a single liberal-conservative continuum (see Sullivan and O'Connor, APSR, 1972); there was little reason to believe that constituency opinion would also do so (cf. any study of such opinion from the 1966 election study). For the larger study, we were lucky in that the NBC-CQ study based its choice of issues on votes that did occur in the 89th Congress and were likely to recur in the 90th. In examining the general question of liberalism-conservatism, however, we simply did not have any direct self-identification question close enough to the 1966 campaign. There was a 1964 Gallup question; the SRC/CPS study, however, contained only feeling thermometers about "liberals" or "conservatives"; there were no self-identification questions in the survey. Thus, we had to make do with a question on the "power of the federal government." The CPS/NES framework for future studies should thus pay particular attention to questions which can be matched with roll call behavior of members.

Only when such linkages are established can we begin to overcome some of the difficulties cited by Stokes in his critique of spatial models of party competition (notably, the assumption in such models of a common issue space for candidates and voters). If we do not pay particular attention to minimizing this information loss, then our studies are not likely to advance much further.

The current CPS/NES surveys have sought to compare the relative closeness of Presidential candidates' opinions to those of the voter in establishing patterns of linkage. Here, the perception of the voter of the various stands of the candidates has played a critical role. Yet, this sort of question has been noticeably absent from the Congressional studies. Sullivan and I found that closeness to constituency opinion in marginal districts can often mean the difference between victory and defeat (at least in 1966), but we only had our estimates of candidate positions and constituency opinions. Congressional studies have at most asked legislators what they thought constituents' opinions were, but we have not asked voters in Congressional elections to evaluate the stands of opposing candidates for office. This line of research has proven fruitful in Presidential election studies. We do not know whether the relationships uncovered from either the 1958 or the 1966 data sets with respect to candidate-constituency convergence are real or spurious, because we have no data on where the voters place Congressional candidates relative to their own ideal points on a policy question.

It follows, then, that we ought to ask respondents to the CPS/NES surveys about both major party candidates (at least for contested races)

and their perceived stands on the issues. If we only ask about the incumbent, we shall be missing perhaps the most critical question in any study of either issue voting or representation: the choice actually offered to the voters. Voters do not simply choose "yea" or "nay" on an incumbent's status; nor is there much evidence that a single party ideology would characterize all candidates for Congress. If anything, we would expect candidates to have greater variation across districts than within them. Thus, the studies which have simply compared "safe" incumbents with "marginal" ones have probably overestimated the variance in issue divergence across candidates offered to a particular electorate (i.e., the voters for a House or Senate seat). We could then proceed to construct pictures of the electoral contests throughout the United States by comparing the actual positions of both major party candidates (see below) with the perceptions of the voters and the voters' own preferred policy positions on issues which are most likely to have a shared opinion space.

The data on the positions of the major party candidates could be obtained from roll call records of incumbents (as the NBC News-CQ study did) and from a systematic investigation of the statements of non-incumbents. We are unlikely to have the resources available to us that CQ or any network news organization has in terms of interviewing non-incumbent candidates and obtaining a 100 percent response rate to all such questions. However, it does seem feasible for a network of concerned scholars to obtain positions on non-incumbents (including perhaps mail questionnaires, if funding can be obtained for such a project) which would make a study like that of 1966 possible to obtain more frequently--perhaps every two years. This is a task

which we would have to undertake ourselves, because CQ has informed me that it will not allocate any of its resources to such studies in the future. This type of archival work may be quite tedious and difficult, but the pay-offs are likely to be worth the effort (see studies by Ben Page, Ben Ginsberg, and John Aldrich which are based upon such archival work).

We finally face the question of how comprehensive the data on districts must be. While there are some suggestions that we go back to the Miller-Stokes design and increase the sample sizes in many districts to warrant generalizations, I remain skeptical of this approach. First, it is unclear that we could obtain sufficiently large samples in any set of districts which would constitute a significant gain over the Miller-Stokes design and some recent work dealing with small samples in such studies by Chris Achen. Secondly, I doubt whether we could obtain a large enough number of districts to make such a study worthwhile. Even if these objections were met, what would be the cost to the overall CPS/NES projects? Would it justify such a tremendous expenditure of money? Ought we not wait to see what sorts of results the Comparative State Elections Project at the University of North Carolina yields before leaping into such a massive study again. Some results from CSEP have been intriguing, but I do not see the confidence among my colleagues that would warrant a repetition on an equally grandiose scale of such a design.

The theoretical concerns of studies of representation and issue voting could be met by either: (1) adapting an approach to the estimation of constituents' positions based upon the new

Weber-Munger simulation technique (which represents a marked improvement over the previous version in terms of validation criteria); or (2) shifting the focus of one's analysis from the district level to that of the individual voter facing a choice between two rival candidates for Congress. Given the data on the positions of the major party candidates, such a data set could easily be merged with the general election studies file to create a relatively complete file on the behavior of the individual elector with respect to perceived and actual issue stances of the candidates in his (her) district and the voter's own preferences on the issues. Such an approach would provide us with a data base which is structured along the lines of theoretically important questions and which is also feasible to collect. This approach would also make it possible to include such questions in the biennial CPS/NES studies of Congressional elections and thus provide a longitudinal framework for analysis which has been lacking in previous research.