

March 10, 1994

TO: NES Board of Overseers
FROM: Gary Jacobson & Doug Rivers
RE: Overreport of Vote for House Incumbents in NES Surveys

Since 1978, the NES surveys have overestimated the share of votes received by House incumbents by about 9 percentage points; in earlier surveys, the incumbent's vote had been exaggerated only by a statistically insignificant 2 percentage points (see Table 1). In a memo dated August 28, 1991 and a subsequent WPSA paper (Jacobson and Rivers 1993), we argued that the most likely cause of overreporting was the ballot card (listing candidate names and party affiliations) introduced in 1978.

Before 1978, the vote question was:

How about the vote for Congressman. Did you vote for a candidate for Congress? [IF YES] Who did you vote for? (IF RESPONDENT DOESN'T KNOW CANDIDATE'S NAME] Which party was that?

The votes of respondents who did not name one of the district's candidates correctly were determined by the second question.

From 1978 onward, respondents have been handed a ballot card listing the candidates and their parties. (Figure 1 reproduces the sample ballot card distributed with the 1990 codebook.) Respondents are then asked:

Here is a list of candidates for major races in this district. How about the election for House of Representatives in Washington. Did you vote for a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives? [IF YES] Who did you vote for?

The old form of the vote question contained only one cue for respondents who could not remember the candidates' names: party. The ballot card gives them two cues: party and name. One name belongs to an incumbent a large majority of them recognize even if they cannot recall his or her name spontaneously (86.7 percent of the voters who do not recall the incumbent's name can still recognize it on a list). Far fewer recognize the challenger's name (41.6 percent). If some of these voters take their cue from a familiar name--an option not available before the ballot card--the incumbent's support will be exaggerated.

We found strong circumstantial evidence that this is what happened. Voters who could recall both candidates' names or who recalled only the incumbent's name reported voting for the incumbent at rates only slightly higher after the 1978 changes than before (and the increase matched the actual increase in the incumbents' mean vote share). Among respondents who recalled neither candidate's name, in contrast, the reported vote for incumbents increased by a whopping 16.6 points. Virtually all of the increase in overreporting can thus be attributed to these uninformed respondents who would be subject to the ballot card's effects. From this, we inferred that overreporting was caused

by the ballot card.

The third wave of the Senate Election Study in 1992 gave us an opportunity to make a more direct test of this hypothesis. Interviews for the Senate Election Studies are, of course, conducted by telephone. In 1988 and 1990, the vote question took this form:

I'm going to read a list of candidates for the major races in your district. In the election for the House of Representatives, the ballot listed [INTERVIEWER READS NAMES OF PARTIES AND CANDIDATES]. Did you vote for a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives? [IF YES] Who did you vote for?

The question was intended to replicate the ballot format as closely as possible, and the entries in the enclosed table show that it had the same unfortunate effect. The 1988 and 1990 Senate Election Study respondents over report voting for incumbents just as much as the post-election study respondents (see Table 1).

For 1992, however, redistricting made it impossible to list the names of the House candidates. We did not have enough time to match telephone exchanges with the new congressional districts in many states. Of necessity, then, the vote question was generic:

How about the election for Congressman--that is, for the House of Representatives in Washington? Did you for a candidate for Congress? [IF YES] Who did you vote for? Which party was that? [NOT ASKED IF RESPONDENT ALREADY MENTIONED PARTY]

Congressional districts were identified after the survey was completed, making it possible to add the appropriate district-level information on the candidates and election results. The results of this fortuitous, if obligatory experiment, reported in Table 1, were decisive: The report of votes for House incumbents in the 1992 Senate Election Study was not exaggerated at all. This contrasts sharply with the results from the 1992 post election study, which again produced a large overestimate (10.8 percentage points) of votes for incumbents.

Clearly, NES must seriously consider changing how we ask this vote question. Unfortunately, the answer is not quite as clear cut as these results. The responses elicited by the old format are not without their own sources of error (Jacobson and Rivers 1993). We have to think long and hard about altering the time series on our central dependent variable. We have to alert the community of users about a possible change in the question format to find out how much pain it might cause. There are, essentially, three options:

- (1) Stick with the current wording (which looks like the least desirable option to us);
- (2) Go back to the old wording. It tends to overstate the correlation between party ID and congressional voting, but it gives the right aggregate answer;
- (3) Try some new wording.

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If we do (3), there are several options. One might be to use the old wording as the stem for a more elaborate item, e.g., first ask name recall, then ask vote (without the ballot card, getting a name if they recalled who they voted for, otherwise getting the party), and finally showing the ballot card to those who couldn't recall the candidate's name and asking if they can recognize the name of the person they voted for. We might also try altering the ballot card to emphasize the party and deemphasize the name. Over the phone, the question could be asked as something like, "Who did you vote for, the DEMOCRATIC candidate, Tom Smith, or the REPUBLICAN candidate, John Jones, or someone else? There are certainly other options we haven't thought of. In any case, this deserves some careful discussion.

TABLE 1. QUESTION FORMAT AND THE OVERREPORT OF VOTES FOR HOUSE INCUMBENTS

Reported Vote% - Actual District Vote%			
		Old Question Format	New Question Format (Ballot)
<u>Post Election Studies</u>			
Year	N		
1956	966	1.5	
1958	592	.9	
1960	659	1.6	
1964	803	-0.2	
1966	567	5.6	
1968	708	-1.1	
1970	541	1.1	
1972	951	6.4	
1974	582	2.1	
1976	848	1.5	
Mean	7217	1.9	
1978	761		10.8
1980	713		5.0
1982	528		8.7
1984	967		6.8
1986	699		7.8
1988	756		8.8
1990	528		14.0
1992	991		10.8
Mean	5943		9.1
<u>Senate Election Study</u>			
1988	unweighted 1433		8.8
	weighted*		8.1
1990	unweighted 1330		10.6
	weighted*		12.5
1992	unweighted 950	-1.1	
	weighted*	-1.8	

*By the number of CD's in the state

BALLOT CARD

For the November 1990 General Election

STATE: ILLINOIS

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: 07

**DEMOCRATIC PARTY
CANDIDATE**

**REPUBLICAN PARTY
CANDIDATE**

**Candidates for the
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

Cardiss Collins

Michael Dooley

**Candidates for the
U.S. SENATE**

Paul Simon

Lynn M. Martin

**Candidates for the State
GOVERNOR'S OFFICE**

Neil F. Hartigan

Jim Edgar