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Title: Overreport of vote for House Incumbents in the NES Survey

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Dataset(s): 1988-1990-1992 Senate Election Study

Abstract

Since 1978, the NES surveys have overestimated House incumbent vote share by about nine percent points. Earlier surveys did not show this trend of vote overreport. Jacobson and Rivers argue that the likely cause of this trend toward incumbent vote overreport was a change in the method used to determine a respondent's congressional vote. Specifically, they argue that the ballot card -- which lists both candidates and their parties -- introduced in 1978, gives voters more cues leading them to recognize the incumbent. In turn, respondents are more likely to say they voted for the incumbent. In support of this thesis, Jacobson and Rivers present circumstantial evidence from pre- and post- 1978 NES surveys. Voters who could recall both candidate's 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. On the other hand, overreport increased by 16.6 percent among respondents who recalled neither candidates' name. Jacobson and Rivers argue that virtually all of the post-1978 overreport can, therefore, be attributed to those uninformed respondents who would be subject to the ballot card's effects. This pattern was replicated in a direct test, using the 1988-1990-1992 Senate Election Study. While the 1988 and 1990 surveys used the ballot cards, late redistricting results precluded the listing of incumbents on the 1992 survey. In effect, the 1992 study followed the pre-1978 format. Jacobson and Rivers found that, as expected, incumbent vote overreport was significantly higher in the 1992 survey. To solve the overreport problem, the authors suggest replacing the current congressional vote question with a new format that uses the pre-1978 item as a stem for a more elaborate question design.