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Question Ordering Effects on Reported Vote Choice

Eubank and Gow's articles (1983, 1982) are part of a series of articles (Jacobson, 1981; Mann, 1978) which seek to explain the apparent bias of the election studies' surveys towards incumbents. Unlike other explanations of the same phenomenon, Eubank and Gow's argument pointed to question ordering effects. Eubank and Gow argued that by asking about contact with incumbents before vote choice that respondents were primed to answer that they voted for the incumbent. By naming the incumbent candidate before asking for vote, we increased the likelihood of naming the incumbent candidate. In the 1984 post-election survey, we gave incumbent name and asked about contacts after the vote question. A comparison between the 1980 and 1984 post-surveys suggests that switching the placement of the item improved the accuracy of district-by-district estimates of election outcome and reduced the bias towards incumbents.

Eubank and Gow examine aggregate reporting of vote differences in districts with incumbents and challengers. They compare National Election Studies' estimated district results for 1978 and 1980 with the national averages. Since their charge is that the question ordering in the 1978 and 1980 election studies favored incumbents, the relevant units of analysis are the districts sampled by NES. If asking about incumbents before asking about challengers primes respondents to say they voted for the incumbent, the districts in the NES samples should show greater favoritism towards incumbents in 1980 than in 1984. Simply comparing NES results by district with national averages confounds the problem of question ordering effects with other potential sources of the bias favoring incumbents. The fact that the NES results favor incumbents might as well be differential name recall (Mann, 1978) or an undersampling of districts favoring the challenger (Jacobson, 1981). Pro-incumbent bias might also be due to the retrospective nature of the post-election survey: respondents' memory might be biased in favor of the election's

winners, who are more often than not incumbents. Additionally, even if question ordering effects bias estimated vote in favor of incumbents, that bias might be confined to misreporters (those who claim to have voted but in fact did not vote).

The present comparison takes place on an aggregated, district-by-district level. The actual vote percentages for the democrats and republicans were taken from the Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report summary of election results, for 1980 and 1984. Aggregate estimated vote percentages were gathered from the post-election surveys for 1980 and 1984. In addition, dummy variables for election year (0=1980, 1=1984), republican incumbency (0=not, 1=republican incumbent) and democratic incumbency (0=not, 1=dem. incumbent) were included in the analysis.

We expect to see some reporting bias in favor of incumbents, regardless of the change in question order. Eubank and Gow's argument implies that the bias in favor of incumbents would be more pronounced in 1980 than in 1984, with question order reversed. Additionally, their argument implies that the bias due to election year itself would be nearly zero. (Reversing the order of candidates listed in 1984 should not make a difference for the cases in which there was no incumbent, represented by the election year dummy variable). The independent variables in this analysis included interaction terms (Incumbency multiplied by the election year dummy variable). We expect to see significant coefficients on the interaction terms and non-significant coefficients on the election year dummy variable. 'Error' in this analysis is represented by the difference in estimated vote for democrat and republican candidates less the actual difference between the democrat and the republican. A simple analysis of covariance regresses this error against dummy variables for party of incumbent, election year and interaction terms; this analysis appears in full in Appendix A.[1]

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[1]Because this analysis takes place on an aggregated level, one should expect heteroskedastic OLS estimates. Correction for this kind of heteroskedasticity is relatively simple: the variables are all weighted by the inverse of the number of respondents sampled in each district. (A small number of districts had no incumbent, permitting both democrat and republican incumbency dummy variables).

Figure 1

GLS regression results for 1980, 1984 error in disrict estimates of congressional vote

In 1980:

Error (est − real) = −.75 +1.59 DemInc + .93 RepInc

In 1984:

Error (est − real) = −.3 +.31 DemInc − .03 RepInc

DemInc and RepInc coefficients significant at $p<.01$. Dummy election term significant only at $p<.39$. $R^2 = .11$.

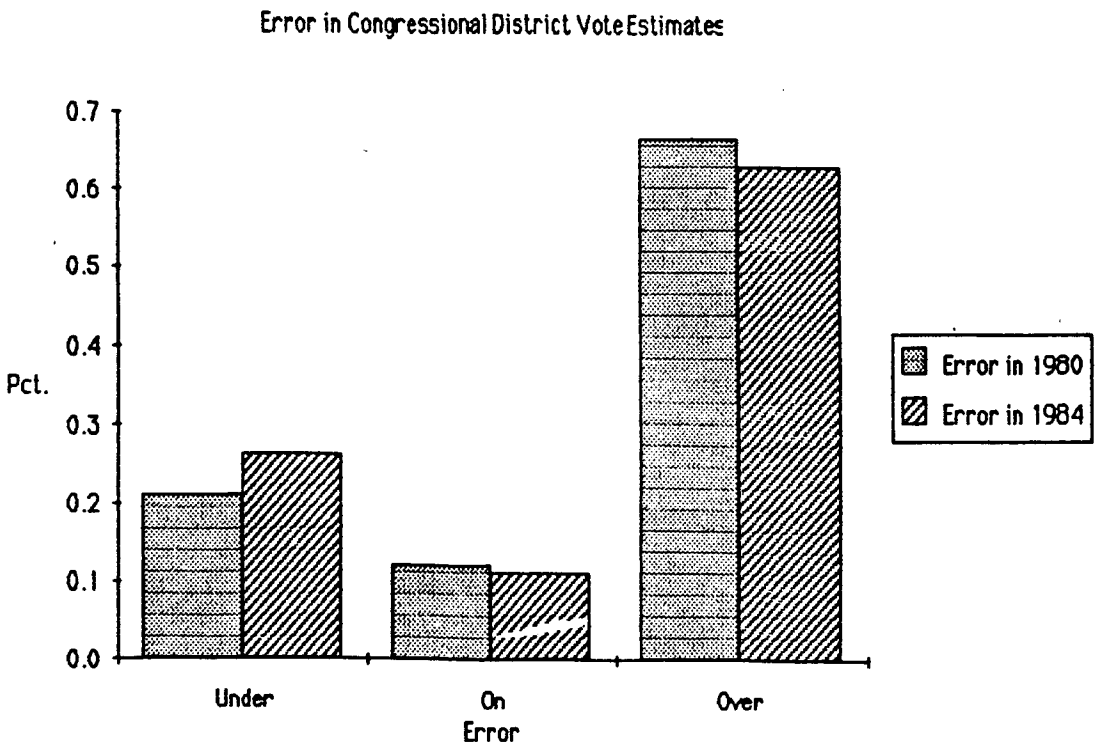
Figure 1 summarizes the results of the generalized least squares regression of the error in the estimates for district results against year of election and incumbency dummy variables. In 1980, if the district's incumbent were a Democrat, one could have expected an error of 1.59 − .75, or .83; if the district's incumbent were Republican, an error of .93 − .75, or .18. In 1984, with the question order reversed, one would expect an error of .31 − .3 or .01 for Democratic districts and −.33 for Republican districts. This model accounts for very little of the overall variance (R^2=.11), suggesting that these results confirming Eubank's and Gow's model should be interpreted with some skepticism.;

The strength of Eubank and Gow's argument should be tempered somewhat by changes in the constant term. District estimates were more slightly more likely to be on target in 1984 than in 1980 regardless of incumbency. This suggests that there were more factors responsible for reducing the bias in 1984 reporting for incumbents than just the change in question ordering. The marginally better performance of democratic candidates in the 1984 election over the 1980 election surely accounts for some of the strength of the constant term. The 1980 and 1984 surveys sampled different congressional districts; improved district estimates because of a change of sample would be consistent with Jacobson's hypothesis. Consistent with Eubank's; and Gow's argument, however, the stability of the change in the constant term is quite weak (attained

significance = .39).

There are more sources of bias favoring incumbents than question ordering. Although we apparently reduced this bias by reversing question order, overall our estimates continued to favor the incumbents. Figure 2 displays a histogram of the errors (estimated difference less actual difference) in 1980 and 1984. "Over" represents districts where estimated difference was more than six percent more than actual difference; "Under" represents districts where estimated difference was more than six percent less than actual difference; "On" represents districts where differences between actual and estimated were less than six percent either direction. Although we were less likely to overestimate the vote difference in 1984 than in 1980, by far in the vast number of disticts in both elections we continued to overestimate in favor of incumbents.

Figure 2
Errors in Congressional District Vote Estimates



Appendix A

Least Squares Regression

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF 31.DIFFW N= 194 OUT OF 224

SOURCE	DF	SUM SQRS	MEAN SQR	F-STAT	SIGNIF
REGRESSION	6	2.9424	.49040	7.1393	.0000
ERROR	188	12.914	.68689 -1		
TOTAL	194	15.856			

OPT: MEANZERO R-SQR= .19150 SE= .26209

VARIABLE	PARTIAL	COEFF	STD ERROR	T-STAT	SIGNIF
32.DEMW	.38158	1.5933	.28150	5.6602	.0000
33.REPW	.18202	.92709	.36526	2.5381	.0120
34.ELW	.07547	.44612	.42987	1.0378	.3007
35.DEMELW	-.18657	-1.2237	.46998	-2.6038	.0100
36.REPELW	-.12279	-.90102	.53113	-1.6964	.0915
37.WT	-.24037	-.74717	.22006	-3.3953	.0008

Note: WT = 1/N of cases per district
DIFFW = WT x Error
= WT x ((DemPctEst - RepPctEst) - (DemPctReal - RepPctReal))
DEMW = WT x DemInc(1=Dem Incumbent, 0=else)
REPW = WT x RepInc(1=Rep Incumbent, 0=else)
ELW = WT x Eldum(0=1980, 1=1984)
DEMELW = WT x DemInc x Eldum