

The Profession

An Update on the National Election Studies

Steven J. Rosenstone, *University of Michigan*
David C. Leege, *University of Notre Dame*

On February 28, 1994, the National Science Foundation announced a four-year extension of its long-term funding of the National Election Studies (NES). To mark this occasion, we want to update the social science community on recent developments within NES, inform you about planning activities and data collections that will unfold over the next few years, and invite you to participate in this collaborative effort.

An Overview of the NES Organization

In 1977, the National Science Foundation (NSF) formally established NES as a national resource to sustain and enhance the diversified database that supports basic research on voting, public opinion, and political participation in the United States. The foundation charged NES with two major research objectives: to continue the time-series of core data that the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the Institute for Social Research had collected in their unbroken series of national studies of the American electorate, covering all 13 presidential and midterm elections between 1952 and 1976; and to improve measurement of core concepts first created in the earlier Michigan studies, including development of instrumentation and study designs to allow testing of new theories of voting, participation, and public opinion.

To carry out this mandate, NES conducts national surveys of the American electorate in presidential and midterm election years and

carries out research and development work through pilot studies in odd-numbered years. The mission of NES is to produce high quality data on voting, public opinion, and political participation that serve the research needs of a broad community of social scientists, teachers, and students who are concerned with understanding the theoretical and empirical foundations of mass politics in a democratic society.

NSF support constituted a mandate to transform the Michigan election studies into a truly *national* resource with members of the research community who use these data actively participating in their further development. As the foundation envisioned when it created NES, a wide and diverse set of social scientists participate in every facet of NES activities, from the definition of the core time-series data to innovations in study content, design, and instrumentation. Under foundation mandate, NES has evolved into a research organization composed of three distinct but complementary components: the principal investigators and the project staff (located at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan); an interdisciplinary, national board of overseers; and the active participation of the research community of social scientists who rely on NES data.

The board is comprised of expert advisors who are responsible for ensuring that each study is as responsive as possible to the research needs of the scholarly community. Along with the principal investigators, the board makes broad decisions on design and general content

priorities for each study, defines the "core" data needed to continue the NES time-series, reviews recommendations for new instrumentation, and along with involved users, participates in each study planning committee. In all, 28 individuals representing 19 different institutions and three social science disciplines have served on the NES board of overseers. Current members of the board are: Larry Bartels (Princeton University); Charles H. Franklin (University of Wisconsin); Donald R. Kinder, *ex officio* (University of Michigan); David C. Leege, Chair (University of Notre Dame); Warren E. Miller, *ex officio* (Arizona State University); R. Douglas Rivers (Stanford University); Steven J. Rosenstone, *ex officio* (University of Michigan); Virginia Sapiro (University of Wisconsin); Laura Stoker (University of California, Berkeley), and John Zaller (University of California, Los Angeles). Thomas Mann (Brookings Institution), Gary Jacobson (University of California, San Diego), and Mary Jackman (University of California, Davis) recently completed their terms of service. The process of selecting their replacements is under way.

Steven Rosenstone, Donald Kinder, and Warren Miller serve as the principal investigators (PIs). Along with the board of overseers and the user community, the PIs help shape each study. The PIs, the NES project staff, and the Center for Political Studies bear responsibility for implementing each data collection and preparing each dataset and accompanying study materials for dissemination to the user community.

The research community of social scientists who rely on NES data constitutes the third organizational element of the National Election Studies. Social scientists throughout the United States participate in every aspect of NES activities: they help specify the substantive areas that receive special attention in each survey; they identify new instrumentation that needs to be developed and old questions that need to be refined; they advise the board of overseers on which study designs should be implemented and what questions should appear; they serve on each study planning committee. Since the 1977 creation of NES, 489 different individuals from 189 universities and colleges have provided suggestions to the NES board, and 161 social scientists from 84 different colleges and universities have participated *in person* in NES-sponsored conferences, workshops, advisory committees, and study planning committees.

The 1994 National Election Study

In the weeks following the November 1994 general elections, the National Election Studies conducted its 23rd biennial study of the American electorate. As in midterm studies conducted since 1958, the 1994 NES employed a single, post-election survey to interview 1,750 citizens of voting age face-to-face for 70 minutes each. Roughly one-third of those questioned were panel respondents first interviewed in the 1992 Election Study and interviewed again in the 1993 NES Pilot Study.

Planning for the 1994 Study began two years ago with the development of new instrumentation that members of the NES user community suggested for testing in the 1993 Pilot Study. A planning committee, chaired by Charles H. Franklin (Wisconsin), and comprised of Bruce Cain (Berkeley), David Legee (Notre Dame), Steven Rosenstone (Michigan), Virginia Sapiro (Wisconsin), Peverill Squire (Iowa), and Laura Stoker (Berkeley) drafted the questionnaire which the

NES board of overseers reviewed at its June 1994 meeting.

At the heart of the 1994 Study is a set of “core” questions that NES has asked in election studies conducted since 1952. Members of the NES user community advised the board on the items they wanted to be carried on the 1994 questionnaire. They include measures of: interest in the campaign; information about politics; knowledge of, contact with, and evaluation of candidates for the U.S. House; partisanship and evaluations of the political parties; political participation; vote choice; economic well-being; positions on social welfare, economic, social, and civil rights issues; opinions about the nation’s most important problems and the most important issues in the local congressional campaign; political predispositions; evaluations of a wide range of political figures and groups; detailed demographic information; and measures of religious affiliation and religiosity.

Beyond the continuation of core, the 1994 Study has several other objectives related to the political circumstances of the election. From the perspective of coalition maintenance, 1994 is likely to be a special political moment, one portentous for the future electoral success not only of the Democratic and Republican parties but of third-party challengers as well. Accordingly, the 1994 NES re-asks batteries of items from the 1992 and 1993 studies to provide an opportunity for social scientists to identify forces that are driving constituencies in and out of the Clinton, Perot, and Republican coalitions.

Due to a combination of redistricting, scandal, and retirement, the 1992 House elections replaced more than one-quarter of the House—the most in nearly half a century. This turnover provides an opportunity to examine the ways in which newly elected members build a relationship with their constituents during the first term in office and secure their districts against challenge in the next election. Although we know that incumbent advantage accrues quickly, is the incumbency advantage secured by the actions that members of Con-

gress engage in during their first term of office, or is it secured because of their first reelection campaign? The 1992–93–94 panel data provide sharp tests of these two alternatives by permitting detailed analysis of the processes by which newly elected representatives (compared to returning incumbents) shore up their support during their first term in office. Panel data provide the way to assess how citizens learn and forget about candidates following an election, and how constituents form impressions of new representatives.

Because of changes in the salience of issues and in mobilizing institutions, the 1994 Study also includes new or expanded instrumentation on health care, crime, welfare reform, budget priorities, and group mobilization efforts.

Planning for the 1996 National Election Study

The board of overseers has set in motion the planning process for the 1996 National Election Study. At each step there are opportunities for the social science research community to collaborate in this effort. The board is currently identifying several likely themes for the 1996 Study (described below) on which it welcomes comments and advice. It would also be very interested in hearing suggestions about additional topics that might be the focus of the 1996 data collection. We invite anyone interested in participating in these planning activities to contact the NES board of overseers or the NES project staff. (The address appears at the end of this article.)

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems

More than two decades ago, Stein Rokkan argued for coordinated, cross-national research to explore, in ways that are not possible “through secondary analysis of independently conducted surveys, the structural contexts of the individuals’ reactions to politics.” Although multinational data collec-

tions that enhance the comparative study of public opinion and voting have been carried out on three to seven countries, Rokkan's plea for systematic research that would illuminate how electoral *institutions* constrain and condition the beliefs and behaviors of citizens has gone unheeded.

As U.S. representative to the International Committee for Research into Elections and Representative Democracy (ICORE), NES has been contributing to a collaborative program of research among election studies conducted in over 40 of the world's (consolidated and emerging) democracies. NES has joined with social scientists from around the world to specify a research agenda, study design, and the instrumentation that will greatly expand the number of coordinated, international, comparative studies of electoral systems in 1996 and beyond. Within each country, directors of national election studies will be responsible for managing the implementation of their national survey and securing the advice and counsel of their respective user communities. Each national study will devote a portion of its questionnaire to items that grow out of this international collaboration. (A portion of the 1996 National Election Study will be devoted to this collaboration.)

The long-term agenda includes interest in three broad themes: electoral institutions (parliamentary versus presidential systems of government; electoral rules that govern the casting and counting of ballots; political parties); the role that parties play in encapsulating political conflict; and the changing nature of political alignments in the face of social change.

Under the auspices of ICORE, NES helped convene an international conference in Berlin in August 1994 that brought together 50 directors of election studies from 31 consolidated and emerging democracies from around the world. A second conference will be held in Ann Arbor in January 1995 when a planning committee will begin to specify the details of the study design, the content of the questionnaire, and macro-level data that

will be gathered in each polity. Instrumentation will be pre-tested in a number of polities including the United States through the 1995 NES Pilot Study.

Environmental Politics

Population growth, industrialization, and the concentration of people into urban centers are placing steep demands on the world's natural resources and are producing global environmental changes of profound proportions. A wide range of public policy questions—from loss of biodiversity, to hazardous waste disposal, energy conservation, air and water pollution, and patterns of economic growth—arise from these global changes. The political manifestations of the debate over these policy questions are plainly visible. Social movements, political groups and parties have organized to shape public opinion, as well as social and political behavior, to influence who gets elected to public office, and to prevail on the kinds of policies that governments and private industry adopt.

The NES board of overseers is interested in suggestions for ways in which we can further our understanding of the political manifestations of environmental issues: on the nature of public opinion on environmental policy questions; on the antecedents of those opinions; and on the broader consequences of all this for politics. How do ordinary citizens come to understand such profound and complicated issues? How do these issues become part of public discourse and part of the considerations that citizens bring to bear on their evaluations of government, parties, and candidates? What is the process by which public opinion gets mobilized into political advantage? Efforts to develop appropriate instrumentation will be carried out in the 1995 NES Pilot Study.

The Impact of the Presidential Campaign

Consider what takes place as the typical election campaign unfolds.

Around the world, wars erupt, governments collapse, revolutions simmer, presidents tour foreign capitals with an eye towards November. At home, interest rates drift, unemployment ebbs and flows, the federal debt continues to grow—and the meaning of these trends is vigorously debated. In the campaign proper, candidates compete in an exhausting series of primary elections, winning some, losing others, perhaps eventually disappearing from the race altogether. Surviving candidates try out themes, images, and appeals, abandoning some and perfecting others. They spend vast sums of money traveling about the country and more on depth analysis, polls, and advertising. They are showcased at their party's national conventions and meet in nationally televised debates. In commercials, they stress their own accomplishments and trade accusations with their opponents. The media subject candidates to intense and relentless scrutiny, questioning their intellectual capacities, passions, finances, philosophies, and family backgrounds. Inevitably, candidates make mistakes. And all the while, political, social, and religious organizations endorse and condemn candidates, urging their members to do the same.

How does all this hurly-burly—"the campaign"—influence voters? How do citizens, embedded as they are in groups and social networks, learn about candidates and issues? What impact does the campaign—events, media coverage, advertisement, and the activities by parties and groups—have on the way in which citizens evaluate presidential contenders and make choices? What role does the campaign play in informing citizens, in shaping or reinforcing their beliefs, and in mobilizing them to take part?

Although vast attention has been paid to voters and to some campaigns, remarkably little has been paid to the relationship between the two. Moreover, the research design that NES uses—a cross-sectional survey, undertaken at the close of the campaign—may not be the right design by which to assess the impact of the campaign. Though superb at assessing the immediate

determinants of the vote, it may not be well suited for disclosing the impact of the campaign itself. In the past, we have tried both cross-section and multistage panel designs along with time-controlled releases of random subsets of the pre-election sample.

The NES board of overseers would welcome suggestions on three fronts: on the theoretical questions that should be at the heart of an inquiry into the impact of the campaign; on instrumentation for the 1996 questionnaire that would better measure the impact of the campaign and the media on the way citizens come to understand the candidates and issues, and on the way in which they make choices on election day; on ways in which the standard design of the 1996 National Election Study (a pre-election interview conducted in the two months prior to the election, with a post-election follow-up immediately following the balloting) might be modified or augmented with additional data collections. Initial discussion of these issues began in November at a national conference that NES convened with support from the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania.

A Critical Review of Recent Additions to "Core"

One well-established function of the NES pilot studies is to develop better ways to measure core concepts. This has led, over the years, to improving the measurement of economic well-being, political involvement, opinions on race policies, and much more. The board of overseers has targeted three sets of core items for scrutiny: candidate assessments (introduced in 1980); values and predispositions (introduced in 1984); and contact between citizens and candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives (added to NES core in 1978). Each body of instrumentation was developed in the formative years of the NES as a national institution. The NES board of overseers is convening several research and development conferences to bring together

social scientists from around the country to take a hard look: evaluate the utility of the concepts and adequacy of the theories; assess the performance of the items; and explore new ways the concepts might be measured.

Candidate Evaluation. Presidential candidates succeed or fail in part because of the qualities of character they present. Drawing upon theory and research in social psychology that underscores the importance of character in interpersonal evaluation, NES developed and tested in a series of NES pilot studies candidate trait inventories. In various forms, these candidate trait batteries have appeared on the National Elections Studies conducted since 1980. An abundance of evidence shows that Americans judge presidents and presidential contenders by their competence, their integrity, their compassion, and their leadership, and that these assessments substantially influence the choices citizens eventually make.

A second aspect of candidate-centered voting appears to be emotional. Through the NES pilot studies, an inventory of emotions that candidates evoke was also developed and then included in national election studies conducted since 1980. The evidence demonstrates that emotional reactions that candidates evoke contribute to the voter's choice, over and above the effects due to party attachments, policy views, assessments of the national economic conditions, and judgments of character.

What is our current theoretical understanding of the ways in which citizens evaluate candidates for public office? How well do the NES measures of candidate perception, traits, and affects perform? Are there other dimensions of candidate-centered voting that NES should attend to? Are there other approaches that NES should take in its effort to understand the personal ways in which citizens assess candidates?

Values and Predispositions. Over the last decade, NES has made a substantial investment in instrumentation designed to advance our understanding of the antecedents of

public opinion. First, NES has committed resources to developing measures of general predispositions that, in principle, should influence opinions on a wide range of public policy questions, including measures of individualism, moral traditionalism, patriotism, militarism, racial prejudice, limited government, traditional conceptions of American identity, gender consciousness, several dimensions of religiosity, and egalitarianism. These measures, to varying degrees, have appeared on national election studies since 1984.

In addition to identifying general predispositions that might influence public opinion across a wide range of issues, NES has also gone more deeply into the antecedents of public opinion in three selected areas: on race policy carried out as part of the 1986 Study; on foreign policy in the 1988 Study; and on public reactions to war, a centerpiece of the 1990–91–92 Political Consequences of the Persian Gulf War Study.

The board of overseers would like advice on several fronts: What theoretical utility do values and predispositions have in theories of public opinion and electoral behavior? What is the utility of the NES measures of values and predispositions for our understanding of the antecedents of public opinion? What are the limitations of the current measures? How might they be improved? What are the new ways by which NES should push forward our understanding of the foundations of public opinion?

Congressional Elections. The 1978 National Election Study marked a watershed in the study of congressional elections. By effectively translating the shared interests of specialists in congressional elections into new instrumentation, NES helped trigger an explosion of research that led to a revolution in our understanding of congressional elections. New instrumentation allowed social scientists to unpack the nature of incumbency effects and identify the role that political scandal, quality challengers, and well-financed opposition campaigns play in undermining this advantage.

NES instrumentation has contributed to an appreciation of the personal dimension to voting in House elections and to the very limited role that policy questions seem to play in the way that citizens cast their ballots. With measures first introduced in 1978 and carried on subsequent election studies, social scientists have been able to map in detail the nature of the relationship that members of the House establish with their constituents.

Yet, ten years after the 1978 NES Congressional Election Study had contributed to an avalanche of research, our understanding of Senate elections was, by comparison, impoverished. With support from the National Science Foundation, NES embarked on the 1988–90–92 Senate Election Study, a data collection hand-tailored to the special characteristics and theoretical opportunities presented by elections to the U.S. Senate. With the Senate Election Study data now in hand, social scientists have begun to specify the ways in which voting decisions in U.S. Senate elections both resemble and differ from choices made in other federal elections: differences with respect to the role of the media, the role of the campaign, the role of strong challengers, and the role of issues. They have begun to identify the ways in which the institutional differences between the House and the Senate affect the relationship that representatives and senators develop with their constituents back home.

It is time to reexamine the instrumentation first introduced in the 1978 Election Study and carried in each subsequent study. How well has it performed? How might it be improved? What should be the next steps in the study of congressional elections and in the way in which NES goes about trying to understand the relationship that citizens establish with their representatives in Washington?

The 1995 NES Pilot Study

Over the last fifteen years, NES has undertaken a series of research and development projects—the NES

pilot studies. The pilot studies provide opportunities for individual social scientists from around the country to test new instrumentation, assess and improve the measurement of core concepts, try out innovations in survey methods, and take intellectual risks. Through pilot study work by members of the user community, many basic concepts are measured better now than when the foundation created NES. Most of the new content introduced in recent national election studies was first developed in the NES pilot studies.

The 1995 NES Pilot Study will be a vehicle by which social scientists who have suggestions for new instrumentation for the 1996 Election Study can try out their ideas.

During the summer of 1995, the NES will re-interview a subsample of respondents from the 1994 Election Study. As in previous studies, the 1995 Pilot will employ several forms of the questionnaire to permit random experiments in which alternative question formats can be tested and compared. (Over the past decade and a half, social scientists have carried out 40 such experiments in the context of the NES pilot studies.) Due to split form administration and panel design, the 1995 Pilot will accommodate about 60 minutes of innovative instrumentation and experimentation. And, like its predecessors over the past 10 years, the 1995 Pilot Study will make use of Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). With CATI, the survey is embedded into a computer program that permits complicated skip patterns and follow-up questions that are hand-tailored to prior responses.

Please direct to the NES board of overseers your suggestions for items that should be piloted in 1995.

A Suspension of Voter Validation

For as long as election surveys have been carried out, the proportion of respondents reporting that they voted has been substantially higher than “official” estimates of turnout based on the actual election

returns. In an effort to provide a better survey measure of voter turnout, the 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986, and 1990 national election studies provided a “validated” measure of turnout, obtained from checking the public voter registration files to establish whether there was a record of the respondent having voted. Many social scientists have grown accustomed to using this “validated” measure of turnout instead of “reported” turnout, under the assumption that “validated” turnout ameliorates the problem of misreporting.

In a series of technical reports, the NES project staff assessed the reliability of the voter validation exercise itself and calculated the overall gain in data quality that was obtained by relying on “validated” rather than “reported” turnout. At its February 1994 meeting, the NES board of overseers reviewed this evidence and concluded that voter validation yielded, at best, a marginal improvement in the reliability of the measure of voter turnout and that the size of this improvement did not justify the considerable expense of carrying out the validation study. Details of a report summarizing the evidence that led to the board’s decision to temporarily discontinue the voter validation studies is available on the NES FTP server or may be obtained by contacting the NES project staff. The board is currently exploring new ways to improve the reliability of respondents’ reports of turnout and to conduct a more reliable, more cost-effective voter validation.

Recently Released

The Cumulative Data File

Last spring, the NES project staff completed its update of the Cumulative Data File (ICPSR #8475). The Cumulative Data File consists of 723 variables derived from the series of biennial SRC/CPS national election studies conducted between 1952 and 1992. The addition of the 1992 data brings to 21 the number of election studies that have been pooled into this sin-

The Profession

gle file which will contain a total of 37,456 cases. Variables that appear in this data set have been asked in three or more election studies.

The Cumulative Data File is "raw" data with SAS and SPSS control cards. The basic mode of documentation is paper, although arrangements can be made with NES project staff to receive a WordPerfect version of the documentation to facilitate printing additional copies of the documentation by users.

To secure a copy of the Cumulative Data File, users at ICPSR member institutions should contact their official representative. Users at nonmember institutions should contact ICPSR member services directly at: Member Services, ICPSR, Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248; Telephone: (313) 763-5010; icpsr_netmail@um.cc.umich.edu.

The Continuity Guide

The *Continuity Guide to the American National Election Studies* is a topical index to all questions asked in NES surveys. It is designed to assist users to determine whether and when a topic has been addressed in a national election studies data collection. Every question asked in a biennial national election study through 1992 is referenced. Also included in the *Guide* are supplementary NES data collections carried out between 1980 and 1991: the 1980 Major Panel, the 1984 Continuous Monitoring, the 1988 Study of Presidential Nominations; the 1988-90-92 Senate Election Studies; and the 1991 Political Consequences of War Study. Appendices include brief descriptions of the Voter Validation Studies, contextual data collections, the NES pilot studies of 1979, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1989 and

1991, and various "nonresponse" datasets.

The *Guide* is available on the NES FTP server (described below) in WordPerfect and ASCII format. A hardcopy version may be secured for \$20.

NES CD-ROM

The NES project staff, in collaboration with the ICPSR, are producing a CD-ROM that will contain the data and codebooks for every biennial national election study conducted between 1948 and 1992 as well as the data and codebook for the NES Cumulative Data File. Additional data collections (such as the 1956-58-60 Panel Study; the 1972-74-76 Panel Study; the 1988-90-92 Senate Election Study; the 1988 Super-Tuesday Study; and the 1984 Continuous Monitoring Study) are also likely to be included in this CD-ROM. We anticipate release of the CD in early 1995.

NES Online: The NES File Server

Social scientists around the world can access a wealth of information about NES by downloading files contained on the NES FTP server which is online and available for anonymous FTP. The name for the server is 'ftp.nes.isr.umich.edu' (the IP address is 141.211.207.52); it runs the 'Serving-FTP' software of LanWorkplace for DOS.

We established the server to increase the amount of information that the NES board of overseers, the principal investigators, and the NES project staff can provide the NES user community. The FTP server currently contains a wide range of resources including an overview of each NES data collection and study design; a list of topics and questions covering over

four decades of election studies; the *Continuity Guide*; details on sampling; information on the NES pilot studies; a bibliography of data use; notices about upcoming studies, data releases and events; a listing of the NES pilot studies and technical reports that can be ordered in hardcopy format; the history and organization of NES; instructions on how to access NES data and contact NES project staff and board members, and much, much more. Most files reside on the server in two formats: WordPerfect and ASCII.

How to Help Plan the 1995 Pilot Study, the 1996 National Election Study, and Receive Updates about NES

Please e-mail us at nes@umich.edu so we can keep you informed about the opportunities to participate in future NES activities including the NES Research and Development Conferences, the 1995 NES Pilot Study, the 1996 National Election Study, and so we can keep you posted on the release of the 1994 Election Study and the NES CD-ROM. You can also reach us by writing: The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, Room 4026, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248; by phoning 313-764-5494; or by faxing 313-764-3341.

About the Authors

Steven J. Rosenstone is principal investigator, The National Election Studies, and professor of political science, University of Michigan.

David C. LEEGE is chair, board of overseers, The National Election Studies, and professor of government, University of Notre Dame.