
The Profession

The American National Election Studies: A Progress Report

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first of what became the American National Election Studies. In October 1997, the National Science Foundation (NSF) announced a four-year extension of its funding for the National Election Studies (NES), through 2001. It is fitting to take this occasion to offer an update of the previous progress report in *PS* (Rosenstone and Leee 1994).

The Mission and History

Although there is an unbroken series of national election studies covering all thirteen presidential elections, and 10 midterm elections, since 1948, a crucial turning point came in 1977 when NSF established NES as the first *national social science resource*, a model NSF later used with the General Social Survey and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Prior to this time, the leaders of the Michigan election studies, the predecessors of NES, sought funding independently for each election study. Although team leaders, including especially Warren E. Miller, placed great value on developing the time series, sought to explore the frontiers of research on electoral politics and public opinion, and understood the significance of these studies for the broader research community, the individual nature of the research projects posed crucial limitations. It was next to impossible to marshal resources to evaluate the core time series, elaborate more powerful study designs, execute substantial developmental research for new content, or engage the wider community of social scientists in study planning. The Michigan election studies changed

the face of research in their field but they were essentially a private venture.

NSF transformed the nature of this project by providing long-term support (five-year grants beginning in 1977, four-year grants beginning in 1994), outlining a specific set of objectives, and establishing a new structure for NES. NES has a substantive mission: To study citizens' choices in national elections and, more broadly, to study public opinion on which electoral participation (and nonparticipation) rests. NSF established four specific objectives for NES: extending the time-series collection of core data, improving the measurement of core concepts developed in the earlier studies, creating instrumentation and study designs that would allow new theories of public opinion and electoral behavior to be tested, and involving the scholarly community more broadly in the planning of studies.

NES has carried out these charges by continuing the unbroken series of major studies in every congressional and presidential election year, engaging in intensive developmental and instrument-honing research through off-year "pilot studies," and systematically pursuing ideas for appropriate new developments and revisions through various individual and collective efforts, including organizing research and development conferences involving a wide array of scholars and other professionals. All NES data are released simultaneously to all interested scholars; neither the Principal Investigators (PIs), nor any staff member, nor any member of the Board of Overseers may analyze the data before they become publicly available for use.

And NSF grants to NES have never included funding for scholarly analysis.

Who Is NES Today?

NES remains based in the Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, at the University of Michigan, but it involves scholars at most campuses in the U.S. and many abroad. Three groups of people play central roles in carrying out the projects that comprise NES. First, the chief responsibility rests with the PI(s) and NES staff in the Center for Political Studies. NES usually contracts the field work out to the Survey Research Center (a separate administrative entity within the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research), but relies upon high-grade commercial firms for some studies, such as the 1988-1990-1992 Senate Study.

To facilitate the transformation from a series of individual research projects to a truly national resource, NSF established a Board of Overseers comprised of scholars from around the country. Board members are appointed by the Foundation for fixed terms and charged with insuring that NES will serve the interests and needs of the national social science community. The members of the Board of Overseers have taken increasingly active roles as individuals and as a group, in the conception and design of specific studies.

Finally, the research community of scholars who use the studies is actively drawn into the project in many ways, especially through open invitations to submit proposals and suggestions for content and to comment on tentative plans for studies, and

through inclusion in research and development conferences. It is difficult to say exactly how many people include themselves in this community, but at least 220 individuals have participated in person in NES meetings, conferences, and committees; at least 600 individuals have provided suggestions to the Board; and the (not entirely complete) bibliography of publications, papers, and dissertations (in English) making use of NES data lists works by about 1,250 different individuals.

Those long familiar with NES will find considerable change in key personnel over the last two years. In the spring of 1996, long-time Director of Studies Santa Traugott retired and was succeeded by Kathryn Cirksena, who deftly and very successfully managed the complex 1996 National Election Study. Dr. Cirksena (cirksena@umich.edu) and Project Manager Thomas Ivacko (ivacko@umich.edu) now constitute the veteran core of the NES staff. In the fall of 1996, principal investigator Steven Rosenstone left the University of Michigan to become Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota. In the spring of 1997, Virginia Sapiro, then a member of the Board of Overseers, assumed primary organizational and intellectual responsibility for NES and, with the beginning of the new grant period, became Principal Investigator. Steven Rosenstone remains associated with the project as Co-Principal Investigator.

Larry Bartels (Princeton University) succeeded David Legee as chair of the national Board of Overseers in the summer of 1997. The rest of the Board members include Gary Cox (University of California, San Diego), Charles Franklin (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Robert Huckfeldt (Indiana University), Jon Krosnick (Ohio State University), David Legee (University of Notre Dame), Wendy Rahn (University of Minnesota), W. Phillips Shively (University of Minnesota) and Laura Stoker (University of California, Berkeley). Warren Miller, the chief architect of the project and longtime principal investigator, remains involved as Principal Investigator Emeritus (and an *ex officio* member of the Board).

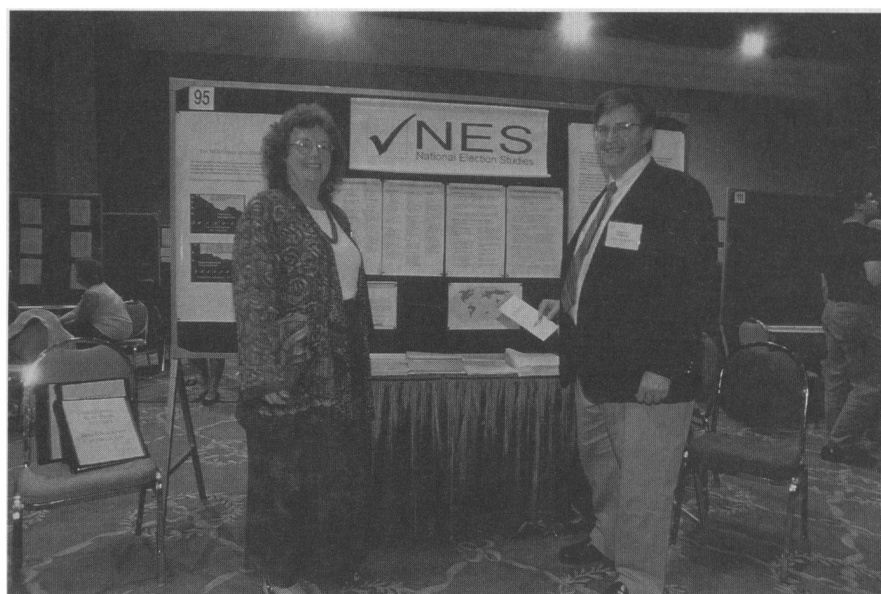
Recent Accomplishments of NES: 1994–1997

The last four years have constituted a period of tremendous vitality for NES. During this period NES fielded two major election studies in 1994 and 1996, both including respondents empaneled from the 1992 study; increased the power of NES data by expanding the ways they can be used in conjunction with other individual-level and macro-level data; implemented an intellectually ambitious program of research and development that included five R&D conferences, the 1995 and 1997 Pilot Studies, and the 1994 Behavioral Reporting Study; brought on line new electronic resources to increase communication between the research community and NES staff and to increase access to NES resources; increased Board interaction and consultation with the NES research community; and, as discussed above, recruited “new blood” in leadership and staff positions.

The 1994 and 1996 Election Studies

Both the 1994 and 1996 Election Studies were designed as data collections in the traditional NES time series and part of a major 1992–1994–1996 panel study. They are too rich to permit more here than a suggestion of their themes and power.

(More complete information is available online at <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/>.) Both the planned aspects of content and design, and the unique political circumstances of these three elections, make these data a resource that will be mined by scholars for years to come. The panel design allows scholars to focus on the history of the “Clinton coalition” and the dynamics of congressional change from 1992, with its unusual degree of turnover, through 1994, when the Republicans gained control of both houses for the first time since 1952, and beyond. The 1994 study includes considerable new congressional material designed to help scholars understand this political earthquake. The 1996 study benefited from intensive efforts to develop a more theoretical definition of the “core” time-series content (resulting in a slimmed-down version), which in turn created the opportunity for expanding new lines of inquiry in many areas, including media exposure, strategic voting, the congressional campaign, issue coverage, issue importance and uncertainty, the environment, social capital, and the comparative study of electoral systems. In a major technical innovation, NES introduced Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) in 1996, thus expanding the design flexibility of the studies.



NES Principal Investigator Virginia Sapiro (L) and NES Board of Overseers member Charles Franklin at the 1997 APSA Annual Meeting in Washington.

Coordination with Other Data Collections

Although NES is itself a collaborative project designed with input from many diverse social scientists, part of the opportunity and responsibility of serving as a national social science resource involves facilitating the use of NES data in conjunction with other individual- and macro-level data collections to leverage the power of both. NES data have long been used as a basic platform for individual research projects by scholars who use the data as a nationally representative base-line of comparison with their own more specialized studies, and by those who integrate NES data with data they have collected (for example, information on members of Congress) for their own purposes.

NES has increasingly sought to identify opportunities for coordination with other data collection projects so as to leverage the scientific power of the studies involved and enhance NES's ability to pursue its mission. In the most exciting example, NES is one of the central partners in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the most extensive program of cross-national electoral research ever undertaken. Working under the auspices of the International Committee for Research into Elections and Representative Democracy (ICORE), Steven Rosenstone helped lead the planning committee for this unprecedented cooperation among more than fifty consolidated and emerging democracies. NES consulted extensively with scholars in comparative studies while preparing its contribution. The planning committee negotiated a common CSES module which all participants promised to carry in their national election studies as they occurred (and which NES included in 1996) as well as a common set of macro-data to accompany the survey data. Board members Gary Cox, David Legee, and Phil Shively also participated in the project; Shively is currently serving as the NES liaison with CSES. The potential scholarly benefits of NES's connection to this international effort are legion. First, it allows students of comparative elec-

tions, representative systems, and public opinion to engage in research based on planned, rather than ad hoc, comparisons. But second, NES participation should have implications for the study of the U.S. political system specifically; by facilitating research on the U.S. in comparative perspective, CSES may help to overcome the parochialism of much American electoral research.

NES participated in three other efforts to extend the utility of NES data by linking them to other projects and data sources. In 1996, the Board initiated a project to identify, collect, and incorporate appropriate contextual data into the survey data file. The same year NES PI Steven Rosenstone and members of the Board conferred with the Content Analysis Consortium, a team of social scientists under the leadership of Marion Just formed to collect and code information about media election coverage usable with NES data. Also in 1996, the NES Board coordinated question content with the National Black Election Study headed by Katherine Tate.

Research and Development Activities

These fall into two general categories: developmental or "pilot" data collections, and research and development conferences. NES pilot studies have produced one of the richest collections of experimental survey data in existence, and have provided the primary basis for significant innovations in the NES questionnaire over the last twenty years. Much of the now-standard NES content—for example data on values and predispositions, candidate evaluations, and congressional elections—was initiated in pilot studies. Even "staying the same," that is, maintaining the time-series data collection at a high level, requires developmental research to update indicators of core concepts in response to theoretical, methodological, and political developments. For obvious examples, continuous monitoring of basic foreign policy and defense attitudes cannot now be tapped through questions reflecting the Cold War world. Questions about racial perceptions

cannot be the same now as they were in the 1956 study. More theoretically, NES questions must reflect new knowledge about the nature of the survey response.

The agenda for pilot studies, each of which was conducted in off-years, was designed with input received in response to explicit open invitations for members of the research community to submit ideas. The pilot studies were aimed at both long-term improvements and the specific needs of the study of the upcoming congressional or presidential election.

The 1995 and 1997 studies include material on (among other things) measures of uncertainty; tradeoffs among government programs, taxes, and deficit reduction; affective responses to political figures; environmental attitudes, beliefs, and behavior; humanitarianism; media exposure; the group basis of U.S. politics; public support for the President, Congress, and Supreme Court; mobilization into nonelectoral participation; government waste; and response latency. These data, like all NES data, are available to the research community. A further developmental study conducted along with the 1994 study focused on the mechanisms accounting for overreporting of turnout and, by contrast, church attendance. Finally, the 1996 study included a mode experiment testing the effects of telephone versus face-to-face interviewing.

Even in the electronic era there is no full substitute for bringing scholars together to assess the state of their field and identify directions for future research. During the 1993–1997 period, the Board of Overseers sponsored research and development conferences on the impact of the presidential campaign (cooperatively with the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication), candidate evaluations, values and predispositions, congressional research, and advances in cognitive science (cooperatively with the University of California, San Diego). In each case, conference papers and discussions have had direct impact on the study planning that followed. Budget reductions will now necessitate searching for alternative means

of support for continuing these important functions.

Electronic Resources

NES fully entered the electronic age during the 1993–1997 grant period. NES brought its FTP server (<ftp://ftp.nes.isr.umich.edu>) on line in 1994, and launched the NES web site in 1995. The web site provides online access to NES data and codebooks; updates on news and information about the project and its data; the *NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior* (which offers immediate access to tables and graphs displaying the ebb and flow of public opinion and electoral choice in American politics since 1952); abstracts of *NES Pilot Study and Technical Reports*; the bibliography of NES data use; and an email gateway to communicate with the NES staff and Board or join the NES mailing list. In a development aimed at facilitating use of NES time series to its full longitudinal advantage, a collaborative effort between NES and ICPSR produced the first *NES Cumulative Data File* on CD-ROM in 1995.

Community Interaction

The NES principal investigators, Board, and staff have sought improved ways of communicating with the larger community, both to receive suggestions, proposals, and criticism, and to distribute information that would enhance the community's use of the project data and resources. NES distributes two to three newsletters a year, solicits ideas for pilots, and initiates special efforts to work with others in the research community as key needs arise such as preparing for the CSES collaboration. Principal investigators and Board members regularly submit reports to newsletters such as *Votes and Opinions* and *ICORE News*, and they have occasionally held special panels or listening sessions at conferences. Beginning in 1996, we began a program of establishing a regular poster session at APSA and other meetings to facilitate interaction and communication between the NES PIs and Board and members of

the wider research and teaching community.

The Next Four Years: Opportunities, and Challenges

The renewed commitment of NSF to NES for the 1998–2001 period ensures the continuity of the crucial time-series data collection. It also means that NES will continue to serve the research community in other ways. At the same time, the level of support provided by NSF in the 1998–2001 grant represents a cut of roughly 24% from the 1994–1997 period. This substantial decrease will, of course, have a noticeable impact on the quality and quantity of the data and services NES will be able to provide its user community. The following is a brief overview of the activities and contributions planned for this period, as well as some of the most important challenges.

The 1998–2001 grant period includes major election studies in 1998 and 2000. A committee made up of NES Board members and other interested scholars, and chaired by Wendy Rahn, is well into the planning process for the 1998 National Election Study. The 1998 study will likely feature renewed attention to the group basis of electoral choice, including expanded attempts to measure the extent to which respondents are mobilized to turn out, or to vote for specific candidates, by the efforts of a variety of groups. Planning will begin very soon for the 2000 study; the principal investigators and Board members are eager to receive ideas and suggestions from all interested scholars regarding the design and content of the 2000 survey.

Researchers will notice effects of budget cuts on these studies. The sample size will be smaller than in the past, survey instruments will probably be shorter, and the design will be basic. As a result of one of the more difficult decisions the PIs and Board of Overseers made, NES will shift its mode of interviewing from face-to-face toward the telephone in an effort to save money.

Results from careful experimental comparison of telephone and in-person responses to the 1996 NES post-election survey suggest that tele-

phone interviews with “experienced” respondents can provide data comparable in quality to those provided by in-person interviews. More research is needed to assess the impact of telephone interviewing with fresh samples of respondents. The most threatening drawback posed by a telephone survey usually is its sample coverage, underrepresenting the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and other crucial subpopulations, and overrepresenting some groups such as the religiously active middle class. Through an innovative combination of high quality sampling methods, extensive telephone interviewing, and substitution of in-person interviewing where necessary, NES hopes to realize substantial savings while maintaining the extraordinary sample quality that makes it the survey of record in the study of public opinion, political participation, and voting behavior.

During the 1998–2001 period there will be only one data collection aimed specifically at developmental research, in contrast the long history of pilot studies in odd-numbered years since 1979. This study will be conducted during the 1998 electoral season, offering a unique opportunity for improving NES instruments for investigating core concepts in a political setting comparable to that of regular NES surveys. The results of this developmental research will be fed into the 2000 study.

Although NSF has provided no support to date in this grant period for continued NES participation in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, we are seeking funds to ensure that the American National Election Studies remains one of the collaborators and, as our colleagues abroad have urged, the home of the project Secretariat. NES is participating in a key CSES meeting in Berlin in April 1998.

The much-anticipated second edition of the NES CD-ROM should be available this Spring. This disk contains all NES studies from 1948 to 1996, all of the codebooks, and some other auxiliary material. But the most exciting new development is the inclusion on the disk of a Java-based program commissioned by NES which allows users to search through the data and codebooks, run

basic statistical analyses, and extract data for further analysis with unprecedented ease. The CD-ROM is available from the ICPSR. (For information, contact the ICPSR at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>).

A Call for Involvement

The National Election Studies is a collaborative survey research project designed to serve the broad community of scholars in the fields of elections, public opinion, and political participation. The project is guided by a Board of scholars drawn from the larger research community and appointed by NSF. Individual studies are designed by committees including scholars from the community who have shared their ideas and suggestions; this is also the pool of people from whom new members of the Board are usually recruited. The performance and the promise of the project are regularly reevaluated by NSF and the large number of peer reviewers it selects from throughout the research community. Reviewers, of course, have been selected who have not been directly involved in NES activities.

Although community involvement and collaboration have always been essential to NES, this is an especially crucial time for those who depend on NES for their research and/or teaching to get involved. Because the opportunities for developmental research and conference participation are reduced, NES must seek new— inexpensive—ways to continue involving the wider research community in the project. We will continue to issue calls for ideas and suggestions through the extensive NES mailing list, and will continue NES participation in poster sessions and other forums at major professional conferences.

NES needs advice on the specific features of its studies, products, and services, but also, fundamentally, on the long-term evolution of NES as a national social science resource. How can NES best contribute to the development of political science, and of the social sciences more gener-

ally? What is the appropriate relationship between NES and other data collection projects? Of course, the most important question is how NES data can best offer scholars the resources to do creative, interesting, important, high-quality research. Certainly, science has been advanced by the research published by the huge community of scholars who use these data. But both the election studies and pilot studies offer virtually unlimited possibilities for additional scholarly inquiry. How can we help ensure that the massive data resources made available by NES and its institutional predecessors will continue to be analyzed by political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, communications researchers, historians, and others to full advantage?

The specific goals and mission of NES create a set of trade-offs that require careful consideration by the project staff, Board of Overseers, and the wider research community. Among the questions that have long been on the NES agenda are: How should we manage the constant tension between continuity and innovation in a project whose data archive now spans five decades? How do we assess the trade-offs that arise in balancing our mission of preserving the time series with that of improving measurement and providing scientific leadership? How can NES continue to respond to the diversity of scholarly questions and, sometimes conflicting, approaches even within its particular portion of the scientific universe, and to the new theoretical and methodological possibilities that arise with scientific progress, without being spread too thin? How can NES maintain its high quality and collaborative nature with real decreases in resources? These questions, which the NES project staff and Board of Overseers have long debated within their planning processes, are currently being systematically studied within the National Science Foundation and other institutions involved in shaping national science policy. NSF is embarked upon a general evaluation of long-term data collection projects

and related “infrastructure” issues in the social sciences. An assessment of the scientific value of NES will naturally be an important component of that more general evaluation.

By fortuitous coincidence, this critical juncture in the history of the National Election Studies coincides with the 50th anniversary of the first institutional precursor of NES, the 1948 election study conducted by Angus Campbell and his associates. This is a cause for reflection and celebration. A pair of panels at the 1998 APSA Annual Meeting will mark this anniversary with discussions of papers by leading scholars emphasizing longitudinal analysis exploring continuity and change in public opinion and electoral dynamics.

As always, we would be grateful for any reactions or advice. Please share your views with either of us or any member of the Board of Overseers. To join the NES mailing list, contact nes@umich.edu. You can also reach us by writing: The National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248; by phoning 734-764-5494; or by faxing 734-764-3341. You may learn much more about the project, keep up with the latest news, and explore NES data at the NES web site, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes>.

References

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