

THE LOCALIZATION OF U.S. HOUSE ELECTIONS AND THE 1989 INDIANA 4TH DISTRICT SPECIAL ELECTION

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Abstract. The nationalization thesis, as it pertains to Congressional elections, argues that they are decided by national factors rather than factors in the individual districts. This paper critiques the nationalization thesis as applied to U.S. House elections. The election examined is the 1989 4th district special election contended by Democrat Jill Long and Republican Dan Heath. The campaign and election results, rather than reinforcing the nationalization of Congressional elections, demonstrate instead the localization of Congressional elections.

Over the past 30 years, a major tenet of political science research has been that politics in the U.S. have become "nationalized" (Agnew, 1987). The nationalization thesis argues that politics have come to center upon national issues, with political alignments "crystallizing around national social cleavages to produce national patterns of political mobilization and partisanship" (Agnew, 1988, 307). Thus, the nationalization thesis argues that politics and political behavior in the U.S. are focused upon the national level rather than the local level. One major piece of evidence usually presented to support this argument is the nationalization of U.S. Congressional elections. The nationalization thesis argues that each of these elections is a reflection of factors at the national level, rather than being based upon the candidates or issues in each congressional district.

Over the past 5 years, a second piece of evidence for the nationalization argument has been advanced: the growing influence of the Democratic and Republican parties at the national level in Congressional elections (see, for examples, Herrnson, 1986, 1988). Over the past 10 years, the national parties have expanded their abilities to assist congressional candidates. This argument suggests that as the parties increase their assistance to individual candidates, the parties will be able to impose their issues and values on these individual Congressional elections, thereby making them more focused on national issues rather than local ones.

This article examines the nationalization thesis as it pertains to U.S. Congressional elections. First, I examine the nationalization thesis as it pertains to voting, and then examine the arguments made for the growing role of the national parties in Congressional elections. Third, I look at one recent election in more detail to examine the influence of national and local factors on Congressional elections, and to examine how the national parties and nationally-known consultants shape Congressional elections. This case study, the March 1989 Indiana 4th Congressional district special election, should have, of any recent Congressional election, reinforced the nationalization thesis.

Nationalization or Localization of the Electorate?

The seminal work arguing that a nationalization of the electorate in Congressional elections has occurred is that of Donald Stokes (1967). Stokes (1967, 183), in examining elections from the 1870s to the 1950s, "feels that the past century has witnessed a profound change in the degree to which a local politics has produced the forces moving the electorate in our congressional elections." Stokes, from his analysis, argues that "the primary conclusion (to be drawn) in the United States over most of a century is the substantial decline of the constituency as a distinct arena of conflict in Congressional elections" (1967, 196), and that by "the middle of this century the public decided whether and how to vote for Congress less than ever before on the basis of influences distinctive to the constituency" (1967, 202).

Stokes' (1967) conclusion that congressional elections are national events decided by national factors rather than local events "worked its way most thoroughly into the literature" (Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale 1984, 80). Indeed, as Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale (1984, 80) point out, Stokes' "findings have become part of the core of accepted knowledge in political science." However, recent empirical evidence strongly suggests that the American electorate has not become nationalized.

Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale (1984, 80) repeated Stokes' analysis and came to far different conclusions. They argue that:

there is no nationalization of partisan voting at work in Congressional elections. Swings in Congressional voting continue to be more influenced by factors within the constituencies, and the impact of national forces on Congressional vote choices has not increased over the past century or so.

The idea that congressional elections are more the product of local than national forces has been discovered by other researchers as well. Indeed, Mann (1988, 33) recently argued that rather than a nationalization, the last few decades have seen a "localization of political forces in House elections" (see also Mann 1987; 1978).

Fiorina (1989, 83), in discussing the increased importance over the past 15 years of incumbent Congressmen performing constituency service to enhance their reelection chances, notes that:

the flip side of the increased importance of constituency service in congressional elections is the decline in the importance of national forces. Studies in the past decade have documented the declining importance of presidential coattails and, with less certainly, the weakened impact of national economic conditions in congressional elections. The House of Representatives, at least, is more insulated from national currents than in any previous period of American history.

Indeed, even a strong proponent of the nationalization thesis of American politics, William Lurch (1987, 118), admits that "many legislators have succeeded in protecting themselves, even if not perfectly, from changes in the national political climate. Particularly in the House (of Representatives), incumbents have to a significant degree insulated themselves from political forces outside their district". Lurch (1987, 250) further notes, in an analogy to product advertising, that to voters in congressional elections the "local product" is currently more important than the national parties' "brand label".

Growing Influence of the National Political Party Organizations?

A second piece of evidence given to support the nationalization thesis as it pertains to Congressional elections is the growing role of the national political party organizations in providing assistance to Congressional candidates. Herrnson (1986, 1988) notes that the parties help candidates in competitive races design strategies to solicit campaign funding from sources outside the party and provide candidates with polling data and other services. It should be noted that the national parties, however, do not select can-

didates or manage their campaigns, nor are they major sources of funding for the candidates. For Herrnson (1988), the parties do not run campaigns, but instead serve as an intermediary between competitive House candidates, PACS, campaign consultants and other important electoral players outside the party organization (Herrnson 1988, 111). At their strongest, the national parties are "important appendages" to the individually built candidate campaign organizations in competitive House races (Herrnson 1988, 111). Rather than running the campaigns, the national party organizations are used by the individual candidates to help obtain resources they might not be able to obtain on their own. As Lawson (1990, 309) notes "the national parties do not do anything at all by themselves. What they do is help." (Indeed, it should be noted that Herrnson (1988) estimates that only 25% of all House candidates get this limited assistance, and this is probably an overestimation given the current competitiveness of most House races. The other 75% or more get little or no assistance from the national parties).

Herrnson (1988, 127) argues that, however, if the national parties become stronger that:

the emergence of national party organizations as important congressional campaigners may also foster the development of a stronger, more nationally oriented sense of party identification among voters. The national party campaigning ... helps clarify, solidify, and strengthen the images that are presented to voters by the two major parties. Party-centered television commercials, radio advertisements, and press releases are very important in this respect. They present fully national campaign themes shaped by national party programs rather than personalities, patronage, and other local matters.

Thus, according to Herrnson (1988), the increasing role of the national party organizations in Congressional elections will lead to more national Congressional campaigns. Individual elections will be decided by national party themes rather than issues distinct to each constituency. However, the national political parties have a long way to go before they reach anything even approaching this level of influence.

1989 Indiana 4th District Special Election

There has been at least one election over the past two years, however, in which the national parties spent much time and money in order to try to greatly influence the outcome; an election in which the Republicans did campaign almost exclusively on national themes. This election provides a good case to examine the influence of national factors on voting decisions and the influence of the national parties in trying to make individual Congressional elections about national issues. This election is the March 1989 Indiana 4th district special election between Democrat Jill Long and Republican Dan Heath. This election, of any recent one, should have reinforced the idea that Congressional elections are nationally, rather than locally, focused contests.

Centered around Fort Wayne, the 4th district sent twenty-nine year old Republican Dan Quayle to Congress in 1976 as he defeated the Democratic incumbent. Quayle safely won reelection in 1978 with 64 percent of the vote, and in 1980 he ran for the U.S. Senate where he upset incumbent Senator Birch Bayh. In 1980, the 4th district was won

easily by Quayle's district assistant, Republican Dan Coats, who won sixty-one percent of the vote. The 4th district was slightly modified as a result of redistricting in 1981 and in 1982 Coats won a higher percentage of the vote than in 1980, despite the economic recession that hit Fort Wayne and its surrounding area hard in the early 1980s (Guthrie 1982; Gottron 1983). Coats easily won reelection in 1984, 1986, and 1988 with between 61% and 70% of the vote.

When Dan Quayle left the Senate following his election to the Vice Presidency in 1988, Dan Coats was chosen to fill Quayle's vacant senate seat. This chain of events set up a March 1989 special election to fill the open 4th district seat. It was expected that the GOP would easily retain the seat in what was considered to be "one of the safest ... Republican House" districts in the nation (Rasky 1989; also see Cook 1989a; O'Neill 1989c; 1989d). Besides Coats' electoral record, the 4th of the 1980s strongly supported other Republican candidates. Both George Bush in 1988 and Ronald Reagan in 1984 won 67% of the general election vote in the district. Indeed, it has now been 26 years since a Democratic presidential nominee has won any of the 10 counties that currently comprise the 4th (Cook 1989a).

The special election was of national importance to the Republican and Democratic parties. It was the first Congressional election following the swearing in of George Bush and the installation of Lee Atwater as chairman of the National Republican Committee. One of Atwater's main goals as chair was to help the Republicans become the majority party in the House of Representatives, a position they have not held since the early 1950s (Broder 1989). The Indiana special election took on added importance as the first of 3 special House elections in the Spring of 1989, which GOP strategists saw as propelling the Republicans towards their goal of capturing the House in the early 1990s; and of these 3 special elections, the Indiana 4th was the one the GOP felt they were most likely to win (Cook 1989b). In addition, this election carried additional meaning to the national Republican party because they wanted to hold the Vice President's former district.

Thus, the 2 national parties were heavily involved in this race. Both Republican and Democratic national parties, as well as state parties from across the country, contributed large sums of money, plus services and staff to this one election in northeastern Indiana. For example, the National Republican Congressional Committee coordinated the sending of \$57,000 to the campaign of GOP nominee Dan Heath, and \$55,000 to the Indiana state Republican party for the purpose of helping Heath (Balz 1990; Rasky 1989; Edsall 1989). As well, nationally known political consultants descended upon Fort Wayne to advise the candidates in this election.

The Democratic nominee in the special election, Jill Long, had run for federal office twice before. She was trounced by Quayle in the U.S. Senate election of 1986, winning only 3 of the 92 counties in the state, and in 1988, just 5 months previous to the special election, she lost the 4th district race to Coats by 24 percentage points. In both races she polled less than 40% of the vote, and in neither election did she win any of the 10 counties of the 4th (Cook 1989a).

The Republicans' strategy was to nationalize the special election campaign by claiming it as an important election on the road to a Republican House majority, and they brought in national Republican notables from Indiana and elsewhere to campaign for Dan Heath; these included Agriculture Secretary Clayton Yeuter, Indiana Senators Richard Lugar and Dan Coats, Vice President Quayle, and First Lady Barbara Bush (O'Neill 1989b). They further nationalized the campaign by trying to portray Jill Long as a "Dukakis liberal" (Edsall 1989; Laininger 1989b; Bandy 1989). Heath tied himself as closely as possible to popular national Republicans; on election eve, he ran television commercials featuring endorsements by Quayle and George Bush.

What happened in the special election? Democrat Jill Long, in the district in which she was soundly defeated just 5 months earlier, won 51% of the vote to Republican Dan Heath's 49%. What led to this upset? First, her two previous campaigns had left Long with advantages in both name recognition and having the remains of an experienced campaign organization, while this was Heath's first run for elective office. More importantly, however, while the GOP was trying to nationalize the campaign, Long was working to make the election about local issues. The centerpiece of Long's campaign was her charge that the Republican Heath was in favor of higher taxes and was soft on crime. Indeed, the Democrat Long borrowed this national campaign theme used successfully by George Bush in 1988, but she was able to turn it around and use it against Republican Dan Heath, using examples from Heath's governmental experiences in Fort Wayne. Heath was chief of staff and public safety director for Fort Wayne mayor Paul Helmke, and had managed Helmke's successful 1987 mayoral campaign. In these positions, Heath supported the mayor's controversial proposals for increases in local taxes and utility rates, and for the annexation of suburban townships by Fort Wayne to increase the city's tax base. In the Fort Wayne area, Heath was hurt by his ties to the mayor as public anger was strong over these proposals (Laininger 1989a; Toner 1989; Cook 1989b; O'Neill 1989e; Laininger 1989b). As well, Long stressed that the crime rate in Fort Wayne soared under Heath's term as public safety director (O'Neill 1989a; Laininger 1989b).

In the special election, Heath had expected to win Ft. Wayne's county, Allen, by "about 5,000 votes" (O'Neill 1989c). Instead, he lost Allen by over 2,500 votes (Laininger 1989a), offsetting the small lead he built in the rest of the district. An example of the voter anger concerning the local issues Long focused on in the race occurred in St. Joseph Township. Fort Wayne's Mayor Helmke wanted to annex St. Joseph Township to Fort Wayne, and residents of the township were angry with this proposed annexation. While St. Joseph is considered to be strong Republican territory, the annexation issue made 'normally Republican' voters "angry at Helmke", and by association, Heath (Laininger 1989a). Local GOP leaders felt that resentment over this local issue contributed significantly to Heath's defeat. While Heath barely won St. Joseph by about 400 votes, the Fort Wayne Republican Party chairman noted that Heath "should have won (St. Joseph) by thousands" (Jarosh and Leininger 1989), with longtime Allen County Republican chairman, Orvas Beers, noting that Heath "just got ... whipped in St. Joe Township" (Jarosh and Laininger 1989). Indeed, Heath lost, by one vote, his home precinct in St. Joseph Township (O'Neill 1989e).

While 6 months earlier she had lost big, Long and her advisors localized the special election campaign, effectively making it about local issues, and defeated the Republicans' nationalized campaign (Edsall 1989). The 4th district, a staunch Republican seat as redistricted 8 years earlier, surprised everyone by sending a Democrat to Washington in 1989 who campaigned almost exclusively on local issues: her "opposition to new taxes, crime, and higher utility rates" (Balz 1989), and against her Republican opponent as favoring taxes and being soft on crime, based on his experience in Fort Wayne government.

While Republicans had nationalized the campaign, Long's strategy, according to her media adviser, "was clearly ... to localize the campaign" (Edsall 1989; O'Neill 1989d). Indeed, one of Long's consultants noted that Heath and the Republicans "didn't understand what the race was about. It wasn't about Bush and Quayle" (O'Neill 1989d). While some national Democratic leaders saw the win as a repudiation of George Bush and the Republican party, (Edsall 1989; Balz 1989; Toner 1989), Jill Long, given the local nature of her campaign, refused to attach any national significance to the results. Long noted that "this wasn't a referendum on the Democratic or Republican parties" (O'Neill 1989d), "this was just a race between two individuals in northeast Indiana"

(Cook 1989b), and the people "simply were slightly more in favor of Jill Long" (O'Neill 1989d).

Conclusions

The national parties went all out in aiding candidates in the 1989 Indiana 4th district special election. The Republican party and Republican consultants spent much time and money and crafted a campaign focused on the national level. The Democratic party and Democratic consultants came in and, while using George Bush's "tax and crime" theme, fashioned a campaign around local factors specifically affecting the Fort Wayne area.

Over the past few years political scientists have noticed that the 1980s saw the former moribund national party organizations begin to come to life in supporting and enhancing some congressional campaigns across the country. While the national parties' impact is highly debatable, the 1989 Indiana 4th district special election, given its unique national overtones, its high priority to both national parties, and the abnormally high amounts of party funding and attention it attracted, certainly provides a clear, and probably "best case", example of this trend. However, writers in this area then make an unwarranted intellectual leap: if the national parties (and nationally known consultants) are providing guidance and money for these congressional races, then these races will be run as referenda on the national parties and will be decided by national factors. The 1989 Indiana 4th district special election however helps to refute this leap. This election, which of any should have reinforced the nationalization thesis, helped to demonstrate the localization of modern Congressional elections, even if these local factors are brought to the voters by the national party organizations and nationally-known consultants with the use of money acquired from across the nation.

The national parties are beginning to recognize this localization of Congressional elections. Ed Rollins, former top Reagan political advisor and current executive director of the National Republican Congressional Committee, the major national Republican party organization supporting congressional candidates, argued in 1990 that the GOP must change its strategy in order to win more Congressional elections. Rather than having candidates running campaigns based on national party themes, Rollins argues that "Republican challengers will have to run individualized, localized campaigns" to win elections (Barnes 1990, 12).

Thus the national parties may be more involved in Congressional campaigns across the country than ever before. This does not mean, however, that these elections will therefore be decided based on national factors. Indeed, if the national Republican party has its way, the greater involvement of the national parties will serve to reinforce the local nature of Congressional elections.

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