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The Record of American Democracy, 1984 - 1990

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The Profession

The Record of American Democracy, 1984–1990*

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A massive new aggregate data set on American politics is now available. Our Record Of American Democracy (ROAD)¹ data include election returns, socioeconomic summaries, and demographic measures of the American public at unusually low levels of geographic aggregation. The NSF-supported ROAD project covers every state in the country from 1984 through 1990 (including some off-year elections). One collection of data sets includes every election at and above State House, along with party registration and other variables, in each state for the roughly 170,000 precincts nationwide (about 60 times the number of counties). Another collection has added to these (roughly 30–40) political variables an additional 3,725 variables merged from the 1990 U.S. Census for 47,327 aggregate units (about 15 times the number of counties) about the size of one or more cities or towns. These units completely tile the U.S. landmass. This collection also includes geographic boundary files so users can easily draw maps with these data.

We find it remarkable that the electoral record of the world's leading democracy is routinely lost or discarded. Election returns in the U.S. are collected by precinct and passed on to county offices in every state. In these county offices, the official electoral record then gets stuffed under desks, recycled, occasionally put into archives, or most often discarded. For the first time, a substantial piece of the entire electoral record of American democracy has been preserved. We hope someone (or our elected officials) takes on the task of institutionalizing the formal preservation of this record. For now, we hope the scientific com-

munity will take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity.

The ROAD data represent an opportunity for political scientists, geographers, quantitative historians, sociologists, and others to learn about electoral behavior, the political characteristics of local community context, electoral geography, the role minority groups play in elections and legislative redistricting, split ticket voting and divided government, elections under federalism, and numerous other topics of central importance to many disciplines.

Some examples:

- With few exceptions, scholars until now have had access to district-level (i.e. state, county, or constituency) electoral information at best, usually for only one office at a time. Presidential election results broken down by congressional districts are impossible to obtain except for a few recent years, and are of dubious quality; more detailed disaggregation is usually unobtainable. In contrast, our data can provide presidential (and other) election results broken down by the much smaller State House districts and even show detailed geographic variation across precincts within a State House district.
- A recent state legislative data collection project led by Malcolm Jewell (1992) provided valuable district-level data, from which scholars have learned an enormous amount. By continuing in this tradition, precinct-level data will increase the resolution of our knowledge of electoral politics substantially. In contrast to data on the 50 States, 435 U.S. House Districts, 1,916 State Senate Districts, 3,139 counties, and even the 4,675 districts of the lower house of state legislatures, the approximately 170,000 precincts in the U.S. provide considerably more detailed information. They contain information about small, local communities, with much more variation than the higher level aggregates.
- Scholars using electoral data recognize its geographical nature, but they have only rarely been able to access geographical information. As a result, the vast majority of published analyses, even those on topics such as redistricting or political geography, have necessarily ignored the geographic placement of districts. Maps have not had a central place in the study of American politics since V.O. Key was writing. The ROAD data enable scholars to study the geographic nature of American politics and to draw maps easily. That is, not only are precinct-level data available, but we provide the data in geographic formats, when possible, providing information on local context. In particular, scholars will be able to use mapping software, such as ArcView or MapInfo, to analyze geographical features of American politics and to merge them with other types of geographical data.
- Scholars will be able to use these aggregate data to draw inferences about individual behavior using newly available methods of ecological inference (King 1997) and associated public domain software programs (available at <http://GKing.Harvard.Edu>). Survey research has taught us a great deal, but as data on random collections of isolated individuals from unknown geographic locations, they

miss much that the ROAD project can provide. To put it differently, if you were an ambitious graduate student in the late 1940s or before interested in the quantitative study of American politics, you would probably be drawing maps, doing detailed studies of local politics. If, instead, you (like almost everyone in the field today) started any time during the second half of this century, after Robinson's (1950) ecological fallacy article and following the advent of modern survey research, you likely became a survey researcher. Today, the literature is dominated by survey analyses, but with new aggregate data and methods, we all have many new opportunities to redress this imbalance.

- For the first time, scholars will be able to study data from numerous offices at many different levels of aggregation—from precincts, to state assembly districts, to state senate districts, to U.S. House districts, or to states. (Counties and other aggregation levels are also possible.) Even without survey data, this will make it possible to study how the same voter groups cast their ballots across many different offices. ROAD data will

enable more detailed studies of split ticket voting and of the factors leading to divided government at many levels, for any or all states.

- The ROAD data should make possible many new studies of legislative redistricting, and associated analyses and forecasts of political and racial fairness, compactness, the consequences of equal population constraints on gerrymanders, and related issues.
- Finally, this is the first data set to be generally available to the academic community that is on par in terms of quality and quantity with the data politicians and political strategists have been using for decades to target campaign resources. As a result, this data set could also produce new, more detailed studies of campaign strategy, but on a massive and comprehensive nationwide scale.

In part because this data set is of such exceptional value, and in part because it would take many researchers many lifetimes to exploit it fully, we are releasing it prior to publishing much from it. The data have been deposited in the ICPSR. For further information, you can

find a copy of the documentation and data at <http://data.fas.harvard.edu/ROAD/>.

Notes

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1. The ROAD team, in addition to King and Palmquist, has included at different times Greg Adams, Micah Altman, Kenneth Benoit, Jeffrey B. Lewis, Claudine Gay, Russ Mayer, and Eric Reinhardt.

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Crosscutting the Subfields: Learning from Our Colleagues

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When sawing a log or carving a roast, one can go with the grain or cut across it. The difference is that cutting across the grain requires more effort. So it is with patterns of thinking about our research. It is easier to draw on familiar sources—to go with the grain—than to reach out for ones with which we are less accustomed.

We can, however, enrich our own research by drawing more frequently on "experiences from elsewhere." Americanists, for example, generally could profit by reaching cross-nationally for alternative models of institutions and processes. Indeed, if we all were more systematically com-

parativist in approaching our favorite research topics, we probably all would benefit. In this article, however, I wish to focus on a different type of "experience from elsewhere," one that often escapes us: exposure to substantive subfields other than our own.

We all, at times, fail to use relevant findings and methods from other disciplines and subfields, although our failure to do so often leads to generalizations of limited domain, which in turn hinder (indeed, defeat) efforts to develop more general theories of politics. We persist in this failure even though major works in our discipline have

demonstrated the importance of borrowing from other disciplines, whether it be sociology and social psychology, for major voting behavior studies, or economics, for public choice analysis. (Indeed, much of the success of political science as a discipline may be attributed to the fact that many of its practitioners have been effective scavengers from other disciplines.)

Drawing—or Not Drawing—on Other Subfields

The general proposition that those in one political science subfield