Comment: Problems Analyzing Congress, Chronological Age, and Critical Elections

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The above analysis by Whicker and Jewell suffers, in part, because the authors bring an extensive and very diverse literature—elections, economics, and congressional studies—to bear on the phenomenon of partisan change among congresses measured by various manipulations of the age of members of congress. While "critical elections" (Key 1955) denote periods of sharp partisan change, the authors use this terminology interchangeably with "realigning elections" (e.g., Key 1959; Chambers & Burnham 1967, 1975; Burnham 1969, 1970), even though control of the political system (in this case, congress) does not shift from one political party to another. Pomper (1967), in fact, contributed an important distinction between two types of critical elections: realigning elections, in which political control shifts from one major political party to the other, and converting elections, in which political control remains with the same political party, but derives from a different base of voter support. Taken together, realignments followed by conversions where the same political party maintains political dominance define broader sociopolitical periods tied to economic change—periods classified as the rural republic, industrializing nation, and industrial state (Ladd 1970). Whicker and Jewell's analysis, then, calls for consistency in the terminology describing elections.

Assuming membership turnover from their aggregated ages is far more complicated than straightforward because the membership of congress, especially the House of Representatives, increased with population growth recorded for each decennial census, not to mention with the addition of new states, prior to the fixing in 1911 of the number of House seats at 435. The number of seats in the House in 1800 expanded by 36; in 1810, by 44; in 1820, by 27; and in 1830, by 29. For 1840, the number of House seats *decreased* by 10. The expansions of 1850 and of 1860 were modest in size (5 and 6 seats, respectively), followed by decades of substantial expansion: in 1870, 50 seats; in 1880, 39 seats; in 1890, 25 seats; in 1900, 34 seats; and in 1910, 44 seats (Diamond & O'Connor 1976, 567). Therefore, with

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the exception of the three decades in the middle of the nineteenth century, there *always* was a substantial number of "newcomers" in the House—ranging from 14 to 40 percent per decade prior to 1840, and from 11 to 20 percent following 1860—regardless of the definition of the periods of decay and stability.

Complicating matters more, of course, was the secession of the Confederate states that precipitated the Civil War, an epic event that affected not only the membership of Congress, but also who was eligible to vote. From the end of that war through the end of Reconstruction, for example, white males who fought for the Confederacy were disenfranchised while black males had the franchise; thereafter, the former systematically displaced the latter through state-adopted disenfranchising devices. Not long after the 1890s, of course, women were added to the electorate. Finally, the franchise was universalized with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which brought southern blacks back into the political system, and its 1970 extension which lowered the franchise to 18 years of age, beginning with the 1972 elections.

Whicker and Jewell, focusing solely on the aggregate ages of members of congress, are undone by their own data. Seligman and King (1980), on the other hand, actually analyzed the background characteristics of the defeated and newly-elected members of congress. Moreover, while Whicker and Jewell refer to "policy shifts" at various points in their analysis, they do not analyze any legislation considered by any congress, unlike the analysis by Gates (1987) of state statutes rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court as unconstitutional. Though unintentional, their analysis of "generational change" misleads the reader by categorizing the ages of members of congress into aggregate 5- or 15-year intervals, rather than analyzing them as true generations socialized by circumstances in one political period and coming to power in another, as represented by their entry into congress (see Brady 1988).

Whicker and Jewell's less than significant findings for cohorts, given the complications noted here, should come as no surprise. However, they do document the age stability of members of both houses of congress. Curiously, though, they conclude that "these analyses support the notion that party power matters as a driving force behind major shifts in national policy surrounding critical elections" What major shifts in policy?

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