Electoral Dynamics: The Role of Campaign Context in Voting Choice

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Agenda

1. Incumbency
2. Partisanship
3. Campaign Resources
4. Collective Responsibility
# Models of Electoral Control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heuristic</th>
<th>Vote-Choice Model</th>
<th>Implications for Representatives</th>
<th>Analytical Purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Spatial/Proximity Voting</td>
<td>Responsive to Median Voter</td>
<td>Representation &amp; Candidate Positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>Michigan Model</td>
<td>Responsive to Partisan Base</td>
<td>Explaining vote choice/partisan bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>Retrospective Model/Valence Rule</td>
<td>Develop reputation, (honesty/integrity), monitor economy</td>
<td>Explaining electoral outcomes, pres. forecasting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Partisanship & ideology are generally prospective models.

- **Opening Question:** Which model of electoral choice do you think reduces the information cost of voting the *most*? What is one potential pitfall for the model of your choice?
Decline in Competition in House Elections

Percentage of Competitive U.S. House Elections, 1946-2016

Seat Competitiveness:
- < 20%
- < 15%
- < 10%
- < 5%

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Decline in Competition in Senate Elections

Percentage of Competitive U.S. Senate Elections, 1920-2016

Seat Competitiveness
- < 15%
- < 10%
- < 5%

Percentage of Senate Seats
- 1922
- 1926
- 1930
- 1934
- 1938
- 1942
- 1946
- 1950
- 1954
- 1958
- 1962
- 1966
- 1970
- 1974
- 1978
- 1982
- 1986
- 1990
- 1994
- 1998
- 2002
- 2006
- 2010
- 2014

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High Re-election Rates by Seat-Type

Smoothed lowess regression curve illustrated to show trend in incumbent re-election by seat-type over cycle.
Importance of an Incumbency Advantage

- Why do you think American elections are so noncompetitive?
- *Abramowitz et al.*: Decline in competition in House elections in last 50 years
- What is the puzzle *Abramowitz et al.* want to explain and how does incumbency factor in?
- Interested in evaluating three hypotheses explaining decline: *redistricting*, *incumbency*, and *partisanship*.
- Sources of an incumbency advantage (direct & indirect effect):
  - Name recognition (constituency service, past campaigns, etc.)
  - “Perks of office” such as service & committee membership
  - Ability to scare potential quality challengers
- Incumbency advantage congruent with *candidate-centered* elections with relatively *autonomous* candidates
Declining Worth of Incumbency in Congressional Elections

- Estimated Incumbency Advantage
- U.S. House
- U.S. Senate

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Incumbency Continued

- What do Abramowitz et al. find with respect to the relationship between incumbency & decline in competition?
- Non-open seats more competitive than incumbent re-elections, why?
# Open Seats & Variation in Campaign Spending

## Table 2  Competition in Marginal House Districts by Type of Contest, 2002–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Winner’s % of House Vote</th>
<th>Open Seat</th>
<th>Running Incumbent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or 70+</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–70</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–60</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(31)</td>
<td>(197)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Marginal districts are those in which Democratic presidential candidate’s percentage of major party vote is within 5 points of national percentage.

*Source:* Data compiled by authors.

## Table 3  Competition in High-Risk Incumbent Districts by Challenger Spending, 1998–2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenger’s % of Vote</th>
<th>Challenger Spending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LT 30</td>
<td>$0–499,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>$500,000–999,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–45</td>
<td>$1,000,000+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$0–499,999</th>
<th>999,999</th>
<th>$1,000,000+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LT 30</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–40</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–45</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45+</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winners</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(132)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>(33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Risky districts are those in which percentage of major party vote for presidential candidate of incumbent’s party is less than national percentage.

*Source:* Data compiled by authors.
What do Abramowitz et al. find with respect to the relationship between incumbency & decline in competition?

Non-open seats more competitive than incumbent re-elections, why?

Experienced quality candidates more likely to emerge in open seat races

Why are experience candidates desirable for parties & why are they strategic?

What about support for gerrymandering hypotheses (i.e. redistricting)?
Lack of support for the *Redistricting* Hypothesis

Numbers of Safe & Competitive Districts Before & After Redistricting, 1970–2012

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Salience of Redistricting as an explanation

- No support for the hypothesis: redistricting $\rightarrow$ ↓ competitive

  “both parties have succeeded in drawing district lines in ways that cement their current power by eliminating contested elections ... most states were drawn to protect incumbents from the inconvenience of competition”

- Why would redistricting not have an effect on competition in House elections?
- Increased salience of the partisan model in congressional elections
- Similar trends in the Senate, fixed districts
Flexing the Muscle of Partisanship

- Do Abramowitz et al. find support for the "partisan polarization" hypothesis?
- Less ticket splitting in contemporary congressional elections
Decline of Split-Ticket Voting in Congressional Elections

Number of House Members Representing Districts
Won by Opposing Party's Presidential Nominee, 1952-2016

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Decline of Split-Ticket Voting in Congressional Elections

Number of Senators Representing States
Won by Opposing Party’s Presidential Nominee, 1920-2014
Flexing the *Muscle* of Partisanship

- Do *Abramowitz et al.* find support for the “partisan polarization” hypothesis?
- Less ticket splitting in contemporary congressional elections
- What are the implications of increased partisanship for the voting models discussed?
- More weight on candidate partisanship & ideological preferences
- Is there a trade-off between partisanship & incumbency effects in congressional elections?
- Potential implications of ↑ partisanship effect in election outcomes on valence model of vote choice?
Relationship between District Election Outcomes & District Presidential Results, 1952-2016

Smoothed lowess regression curve fitted to illustrate trend in coefficient estimate across yearly models. Bivariate district-level OLS model specified: DemVote ~ DemPresVote
Growing Strength of Partisan Explanation

Variance in Congressional Election Outcomes accounted for by District Presidential Outcomes, 1952-2016

Adjusted R^2 of Yearly Models

- U.S. House
- U.S. Senate
Campaign Spending

Consider the following Prisoner’s Dilemma

Choosing Negative Advertisements: A Prisoner’s Dilemma

![Prisoner's Dilemma Diagram]

- Expected outcome
- Red wins:
  - A competitive election in which both candidates emerge with a damaged reputation.
- Red loses:
  - A competitive election in which both candidates emerge with an unscathed reputation.
- Blue wins:
  - A competitive election in which both candidates emerge with a damaged reputation.
- Blue loses:
  - A competitive election in which both candidates emerge with an unscathed reputation.

What’s the logic behind the game? Can you apply this to campaign spending generally?
Campaign Spending Cont.

- Campaign funds from individuals & PACS allow candidates to invest in campaign infrastructure, boost name recognition (ads), project policy positions, and define opponent (valence & policy positions)
- Campaign spending in election *dynamic*, both sides adhere to the “arms-race” model
- Minimal (if any) independent on election outcomes
- Post *Citizens United* campaigns are getting more expensive on both sides but differential still approaching 0.
- Campaign resources used primarily for *mobilization* rather than *conversion* given precancel of partisan & spatial models in explaining vote-choice
Distribution of Campaign Spending, U.S. House

Democratic & Republican Campaign Spending in U.S. House Elections, 1972-2014
Distribution of Campaign Spending, U.S. Senate

Democratic & Republican Campaign Spending in U.S. Senate Elections, 1980-2016
Independent Effect of Campaign Spending on Elections

dem_spending_diff effect plot

dem_vote

dem_spending_diff

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Increased Nationalization of Congressional Elections

- What evidence that congressional elections are becoming less local and more nationalized?
- Partisanship explaining more & more variation in election outcomes
- However, midterm slump for president’s party still a consistent pattern. Why?
- Out-party partisans more likely to vote & motivated by low presidential approval, thermostatic response to policy change & incumbents forced to take tough votes (ACA)
- Testing the relationship between presidential approval & president’s party (in-party) election performance
- If correlated, evidence for collective accountability & increased ‘presidentialization’ of congressional elections
Punishing the President’s Party in Congress

Predicted Change in President’s Party House Seatshare by Presidential Approval, 1938-2016

Net Presidential Approval vs. House Seat Change in President’s Party

Punishing the President’s Party in the Senate

Predicted Change in President’s Party Senate Seatshare by Presidential Approval, 1938-2016

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Key Points:

- Congressional elections becoming *less* competitive
- Safe & marginal seats are becoming safer for parties while seats that favor other party are becoming more precarious
- Incumbents still hold an advantage, but shrinking as elections become more partisan
- Redistricting plays *very* marginal role in shaping campaign context
- Partisanship effect on electoral outcomes increasing in congressional elections
- Campaign spending *dynamic* in nature, thus canceling out as effect on election outcomes
- President’s party generally fares poorly in midterm elections, function of approval.
- Consider if Madison would have a problem with role of campaign context in vote-choice