REASSESSING THE INCUMBENCY EFFECT

Incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives have presumably increased their vote percentages in recent decades, raising questions about the efficacy of elections in making members responsive. The evidence, however, indicates there has been no improvement in the electoral fortunes of incumbents in the last 50 years. Only Republicans have improved their electoral fortunes, as a result of realignment. This valuable book provides a very different interpretation of how incumbents have fared in recent decades, and the interpretation is supported by nontechnical data analysis and presentation.

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To Kathryn

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Preface

It is widely presumed that, in recent decades, House incumbents have been able to increase their vote percentages. Incumbents have always had an advantage over challengers. The argument is that this advantage has increased. The implications of this conclusion for democracy are troubling. It raises issues about the fairness of elections and the responsiveness of legislators. Incumbents may be able to exploit the advantages of office, boost their vote percentages, and become more electorally secure. That, in turn, may make them less responsive to voters and changes in public opinion.

This book challenges the conclusion that the electoral fortunes of incumbents have improved. It then presents an alternative interpretation of the trends that have occurred. The argument of this book is that the evidence presented to support this conclusion does not hold up to reanalysis. Incumbents as a group have not experienced an increase in their vote percentages. Other indicators of incumbent fortunes, to be reviewed in later chapters, also do not support the conclusion that is so often presented. Furthermore, the quantitative statistical analyses of the incumbency effect that have been presented to support the conclusion are fatally flawed.

Not only does the evidence of an increased incumbency effect fail to hold up, but the focus on all incumbents leads us away from a more relevant interpretation of change. There was change in the mid-1960s, but it involved a significant and sustained improvement in the fortunes of only Republican House members. The shift that took place beginning in the 1960s can best be seen as reflecting a partisan secular realignment helping Republican incumbents.

These very divergent conclusions – a general rise in the incumbency advantage versus it being only for one party – reflect very different understandings of partisanship in American politics. Much of the increased incumbency effect interpretation is based on the conclusion that the partisan attachments of voters are declining. Incumbents are seen as reacting to and exploiting that change to create more candidate-centered campaigns, in which the attachment is to them and not to a party. The alternative interpretation presented here suggests that the changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s were the beginning of a sustained secular realignment that has been partisan in nature. Voters were sorting themselves out between the two parties and not moving away from parties. The increased incumbency effect argument assumes dealignment; however, it is really realignment unfolding.

These alternative interpretations also involve very different normative implications. The conclusion that the incumbency effect is increasing is accompanied by concerns that the increase is a result of members exploiting public resources. They send too much mail to their constituents, issue too many press releases, get too many paid trips to their districts, and stick too many pork-barrel projects into budget bills in Congress to please local constituents. They are also raising too much in campaign funds, discouraging challengers, and becoming too tied to contributors. The presumption is that representation is at risk. In stark contrast, if change reflects a partisan shift of voters from one party to the other, then change might be seen as part of a normal process of voters realigning their voting allegiances to reflect altered preferences. Representation is not at risk but rather is occurring through the process of voters moving to support the party candidates seen as most desirable to them.

The first goal of this book is to prompt a reexamination of an important conclusion about American elections. The analyses that have been presented to support an increased incumbency effect conclusion have significant limitations and need to be reassessed. If prior analyses do not hold up to scrutiny, the conclusion about an increased incumbency effect needs to be discarded.

This is not to argue that, in any given year, incumbents do not have an advantage versus challengers. As will be discussed later, incumbents

generally have greater visibility, more campaign funds, and access to numerous public resources to promote themselves. Money and the ability to engage in promotion matter, and always will. Incumbents win at a high rate, and that has persisted. The issue is whether that advantage has increased over time, which involves changes over time and not situations within any given year.

The second goal of this book is to establish another view of the changes that happened in the 1960s and generate additional research to explain what happened. This analysis is only a start on more detailed analyses. We need research that focuses on why Republicans made such gains in 1966 and why they maintained those gains in subsequent elections. This analysis outlines the nature of the partisan change that occurred in recent decades and suggests where we need to concentrate our attention.

The analysis is far from exhaustive in explaining the shifts that occurred. It presents the need for a reassessment and provides an alternative framework, but finding out exactly why and how change happened when it did will require more detailed analyses. The last chapter explores the issues that will require further analysis. While the analysis is by no means complete, the first step is to change how the patterns of recent decades are seen. If that can be achieved, then research efforts will eventually tell us what happened. The hope is that this book prompts that first step.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into three main sections. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the issue, the presumed change, its significance, and the development of a consensus about an increased incumbency effect. The second section involves a reexamination of the data, with a focus on whether the data justify the conclusions reached. If the conventional wisdom is to be reassessed, there has to be a basis for discarding the conclusion that there has been an increase. Chapter 3 reconsiders the much-discussed vote percentage of incumbents from 1946 to 2006. Chapter 4 examines the net ability of incumbents to increase their vote percentages over their careers, and then Chapter 5 assesses the retirement slump.

While there has not been a general increase in the fortunes of incumbents in recent decades, something did happen in the mid-1960s. The explanation presented here is that the change that did occur involved only Republicans. This alternative explanation of change is introduced in Chapter 6, which focuses on the long-term, gradual changes in the fortunes of the parties. Then Chapter 7 applies that framework to reinterpret the trends that have received so much attention. Chapter 8 addresses the implications of the results of our assessment of American politics.

Finally, many may still wonder how an explanation that stresses partisan shifts over time can coexist with several analyses that seem to rather convincingly demonstrate that the incumbency effect increased from the 1950s until now. Some of the analyses that indicate an increasing incumbency effect or an increasing retirement slump are fairly complicated, quantitative, and deserve more detailed analyses. Appendix A examines, in some detail, changes in the retirement slump indicator, and Appendix B reviews the Gelman-King analysis; these appendices are intended for those who would like a more extensive analysis of the limits of these efforts to track changes in the incumbency effect.

Acknowledgments

This is a project that has taken a long time. The major challenge was in creating an accurate data file of House elections. I am greatly indebted to two students who displayed remarkable work ethics and persistence in helping me do that. We began with existing Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research data files and then checked every record to make sure it was correct. We did that using Michael Dubin's (1998) *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*. We then added in special elections and losers as a separate file so there would be a record for every winner and loser. We also corrected and updated John Hibbing's file on biographical data, including when members entered and left. Peter Neuberger, who has gone on to study medicine, did a remarkable job calmly checking every number. I was impressed by and very grateful for his patience with and care for this endeavor. Every faculty member should have an assistant like Peter.

Then all files were merged, and the process of checking to see if everything merged correctly began. We checked all results and all incumbency coding. The challenge, then, was why certain records were wrong and what should be done with cases that did not fit conventional patterns. A socialist in Milwaukee was elected numerous times but never seated because Congress refused to seat a socialist. Was he an incumbent, even though he never sat in the House? We decided that the answer is yes because he was the prior winner and no one was elected in a special election. Patsy Mink from Hawaii was reelected to Congress several months after she died. Can the reelection of a deceased person count? We decided it does. Voters have a right to reelect whomever they wish. How do you code a person elected

in November both to fill out a vacant seat for the rest of the year and to serve for the next full term? The issues were fascinating and often difficult. Joe Brichacek did a remarkable job pursuing errors, inconsistencies, and missing information. It became a challenge to resolve all problems by his graduation, but he did so. He was another rare assistant, and I thank him very much. He is now in political consulting and doing well.

There are probably still some errors in the data set used for this analysis, but the accuracy that does exist could never have been achieved without the dedication of Peter and Joe. I am grateful.