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Jeffrey M. Stonecash

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PART I

An Increased Incumbency Effect: Reconsidering Evidence

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CHAPTER 1

An Increased Incumbency Effect and American Politics

Incumbents have always fared well against challengers. Indeed, it would be surprising if those in office did not do better on average than those unelected. The important matter is that this advantage has reportedly increased in recent decades. Numerous studies indicate that beginning in the 1960s, incumbents were able to win more frequently and increase their vote percentages. Incumbents have always had a high success rate versus challengers, and now they do even better.

Specific trends will be examined later, but several changes indicate how members of Congress have been able to change the electoral landscape. Members are now able to increase their vote percentages from their first to their second elections more than in the past. The average percentage of the vote incumbents receive is now greater than in the 1940s and 1950s. More incumbents are elected with more than 60 percent of the vote, a common hurdle to achieve a safe seat. Members of the House are now able to stay in office longer than in the early 1900s. From the 1940s through the 1970s, the correlation of their electoral vote to the presidential vote in their district declined, reducing the threat of loss from a national swing in sentiment against one party. They were able to disconnect their vote from the president's vote. It became increasingly common for scholars and commentators to note that the *incumbency effect* was powerful and growing.

There also appears to be a very plausible explanation of why the incumbency effect has increased. The growth of federal programs provided incumbents with more resources to deliver to their districts.

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They also have more resources to promote themselves and remind voters of all the good things they are doing. Since the 1950s, incumbents in the Congress have voted themselves larger staffs so they can engage in more contact with voters. These larger staffs allow members to help constituents with personal problems, which can create gratitude among voters. Larger staffs and budgets mean members can send more newsletters to constituents and press releases to media outlets, increasing their visibility to voters. Members now have greater allowances for travel back and forth to the district, providing them with more opportunities to visit local groups, hear the groups' concerns, and explain their own positions. All these activities involve using increases in public resources to curry favor with the electorate and increase the member's positive image before the electorate. Incumbents also are raising more campaign funds, which allow them to buy campaign ads to present themselves to voters, boosting their name recognition and intimidating possible challengers. In short, members now have more opportunities to do things for their districts and the resources to tell voters what they have done. Finding evidence that the vote percentages of incumbents are increasing should not be surprising.

These changes in the electoral fortunes of incumbents have not been well received by critics, who have offered four main arguments about how the growing incumbency effect is bad for democracy. First, some are very troubled by the steady increase in the use of public tax dollars to fund self-promotional activities such as letters, newsletters, press releases, and government-funded appearances at local events (Mayhew, 1974b; Jacobson, 2001: 30–32). They are also troubled by the practice of adding numerous pork-barrel projects to the federal budget so the local member can look good to constituents (Fiorina, 1977a, 1977b). They see the extensive use of public resources as an inappropriate exploitation of public tax dollars for the promotion of individual careers.

Perhaps the more compelling criticisms involve the negative effects on democracy and responsiveness. The second argument is that the focus within offices on promoting members reduces the focus on issues. Members can presumably use all these resources to increase their visibility and create a "personal" connection with voters, one

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based less on issues and partisan inclinations and more on good feelings toward the individual member. This reduces the role of issues and policy votes in voting decisions. Elections, which should presumably focus on policy issues, become more of a personal referendum.

Third, the greater visibility of incumbents also makes it harder for challengers to mount a campaign against them. This in turn reduces their anxiety about the next election. If competition – the prospect of a relatively close election – makes an incumbent pay close attention to district constituents, the expectation of relatively high vote percentages for incumbents will likely diminish that attention. The safer incumbents feel, the less attention they are likely to give to the district, reducing representation and responsiveness (MacRae, 1952; Froman, 1963b; Fiorina, 1973; Griffin, 2006).

Fourth, the greater the increase in the incumbency effect, the less likely it will be that swings in public sentiment will register in Congress. If the electorate dislikes the policies being enacted, but a growing percentage of incumbents are safe, then fewer incumbents will be ousted in an election. Changes in public sentiment are less likely to translate into shifts in party dominance, and responsiveness will decline. Put simply, if Democrats or Republicans control Congress and enact policies disliked by many Americans, and if most representatives of the majority party are safe, they may be able to enact such policies with impunity. To critics, the growth of the incumbency effect has not been a desirable development.

These conclusions about the advantages incumbents enjoy have now become part of the portrait of American politics presented to students. Incumbents are now reported to be safer than in the past (Herrnson, 2004: 30–68; Jacobson, 2004: 23–51). Texts on American politics report to students that “the reelection rate is astonishingly high” (Janda, Berry, and Goldman, 2005: 341). “The best thing a candidate can have going for him or her is simply to be the incumbent” (Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry, 2004: 359). Texts either suggest that change has occurred – “the incredible incumbency advantage enjoyed by modern-day House members” (Wilson and Dilulio, 2006: 235) – or state it more explicitly – “Incumbents have always had an advantage, but critics point to recent changes that have made matters

worse” (Shea, Green, and Smith, 2007: 557–58). The larger and more important consequence is the impact on the political process. Incumbents “normally win easily. An effect is to reduce Congress’s responsiveness to political change” (Patterson, 2006: 366). “The advantage of incumbency thus tends to preserve the status quo in Congress” (Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir, 2005: 478).

Members of Congress are central actors in democracy. They are the ones who seek to understand and represent constituencies. We presume that the process of seeking reelection prompts them to be sensitive to public concerns and responsive to voters. If public and private resources are creating a process whereby challengers are discouraged and incumbents are systematically less attentive and less responsive, there are reasons to worry about the health of democracy. If these endeavors are successful, incumbents can insulate themselves from voter sentiment and reduce their responsiveness to their district electorate (Burnham, 1975).

The sense that incumbents are manipulating the process and blocking responsiveness and change has prompted efforts to constrain the incumbency effect. During the 1990s a strong movement to limit the terms of state legislators developed, driven in part by a sense that incumbents were unresponsive and out of touch and needed to be removed. The courts have ruled that members of Congress cannot be term-limited, so critics have argued that congressional budgets should be cut back and that there should be stronger limits on the extent to which members can mail constituents at public expense.

DOUBTS ABOUT FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The evidence that the incumbency effect increased after the 1940s seems clear. But what if the incumbency effect has not actually increased? Incumbents have always had an advantage over challengers. The issue is whether this advantage has increased. What if the evidence does not justify the accepted conclusions? What if there has not been a change in the ability of incumbents to boost their vote percentages? If change has not occurred, a vaguely negative and inaccurate view of the nature of elections has been presented, and a considerable amount of skepticism about elections and incumbents is without foundation.

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Why reconsider this general conclusion, given the accumulation of studies documenting it? The process by which we reconsider established conclusions is often less than systematic. In my case the prompt to take another look at the evidence involving this issue emerged by chance. I was working on an analysis of realignment in House elections for another book (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani, 2003). As a part of the analysis, I was trying to re-create the often-reported increase in the average percentage of the vote received by incumbents since 1946. Despite repeated efforts to find that increase, I was consistently finding an essentially flat trend or no increase over time. After checking to make sure that the data and computer program were correct, I carefully reread the literature that produced the conclusion that there has been an upward trend. The footnotes of those works explained, without much justification, that all cases in which a House candidate was unopposed by a major party candidate were deleted.

This means that portrayals of elections over time for the House of Representatives did not involve all House elections. That prompted questions about how many cases (districts) were being deleted, how the number had changed over time, and whether variations over time in the number of districts included had any impact on the reported trend in the average percentage of the vote incumbents receive. The answers were intriguing.

During the 1950s, there were 70–90 seats uncontested by a major party (Democrat or Republican), and that number dropped to 40–50 in the early 1960s, just when the incumbency advantage was reported to increase. This meant that the number of cases was shifting over time and that districts previously uncompetitive were being added to the analysis. It also suggested the puzzling possibility that at the very time competition was reported to be declining, more districts were becoming contested.

The important matter is the empirical effect of the interplay between which districts are included in the analysis and the average vote of incumbents. If uncontested districts are excluded, there is an increase over time in the average vote percentage. If all districts are included, there is no increase. It seemed odd to me that both of these conclusions were not part of the portrait of House elections, rather than just the former. Perhaps the presumed increase was not quite so

clear. This realization made me wonder if it would be worthwhile to reexamine the other standard indicators of the incumbency effect. It appeared that acceptance of the approach to calculating the incumbency effect – deleting uncontested races – was rather uncritical. Someone had done so initially, and it became conventional practice without any debate. Perhaps there were problems with the other indicators, and the trend results of other indicators also needed to be reconsidered. And, as will be examined in subsequent pages, that review indicates that the presumption that these indicators support the claim of an increased incumbency effect should also be seen with considerable skepticism.

Not only were there reasons to reconsider the existence of certain trends, but there were also reasons to wonder if existing trends might be better explained by another framework. The underlying premise of the growing-incumbency-effect approach is that the electorate is becoming less attached to parties and that effective members of Congress can exploit that to create a so-called personal vote and increase their vote percentages. But American politics is becoming increasingly partisan, and party identification is increasing (Stonecash, 2006; Jacobson, 2007). Furthermore, Republicans abruptly took over the House in 1994 and held it for some time, suggesting that their fortunes had improved. Partisanship was on the rise, and Republicans seemed to be benefiting the most from this. I then realized that I had never seen the trend in *safe seats* (defined as a member who receives 60 percent or more of the vote) presented by party. The original analysis by Mayhew had been of all incumbents together, and that approach had continued. He found that the percentage of safe seats for incumbents increased abruptly in 1966 and has continued to rise since then.

The results of examining the trend of safe seats by party were clear. From 1946 to 1964 Democrats had far more safe seats than did Republicans: 72.2 percent of Democratic incumbents held safe seats, and 43.6 percent of Republicans were safe. From 1964 to 1966 Republicans experienced a surge in their percentage of safe seats from 21.6 percent to 89.2 percent. Democrats experienced a modest decline, but the decline was not enough to offset the Republican surge, and the overall percentage of safe seats increased from 58.1 percent

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to 66.1 percent. The percentage for all incumbents remained higher after 1966 because Republicans maintained their new level of safe seats, while Democratic incumbents were less safe. The overall increase was because of changes experienced by Republicans but not all incumbents.

The implication was that an interpretation focusing on changes in the situation of all incumbents might not be the most useful one. Analyses were emerging that indicated that a focus on long-term secular realignments was useful for understanding change (Black and Black, 1987, 2002; Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998; Bartels, 2000; Jacobson, 2003; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani, 2003; Polsby, 2004; Stonecash, 2006). If Republicans were the primary beneficiaries of greater incumbency security, then perhaps the focus should be on partisan changes and their effects and not on some general change advantaging all incumbents.

These two encounters with data served as a prompt to take another look at the presumed increase in the incumbency effect. The analysis that follows stems in large part from having stumbled on these puzzling and intriguing findings. The analysis was also prompted by my prior work on secular realignment. It seemed very possible, as will be explained in later chapters, that what appeared to be a greater incumbency effect was really the consequence of secular realignment.¹ It might have looked like a greater incumbency advantage, but changes could be better explained as a result of realignment. The issue became trying to figure out what we would see in electoral patterns if something altogether different (realignment) was driving patterns, rather than an increased incumbency advantage.

This analysis, then, is not a case of presenting a theory and then testing implications. It is first an exploration of whether the trends

¹ The focus of this analysis is on *secular* realignment (Key, 1959) and not *critical* realignment. The former focuses on gradual changes in the relative support that parties receive and the movement of some political groups from one party to another. The latter focuses on abrupt changes in overall and group support and has been a prime focus of scholars such as Burnham (1970). As Mayhew (2002) has ably argued, the evidence for the presence of critical realignments as a significant source of change in American politics is weak. Not only is that evidence not strong, but there is also considerable evidence that a secular realignment perspective is far more helpful in explaining changes over the last 50 years (Black and Black, 1987; Jacobson, 2007; Polsby, 2004; Stonecash, 2006).

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that are regularly reported are suspect and then an exploration of whether the trends that do exist might be better explained by another perspective.

This issue of whether the incumbency effect has increased is in many ways a dispute about data trends: do they go in the directions presumed? But the implications of the conclusions are much greater. If incumbents are able to use campaign funds and the resources that come with being in office to increase their vote percentages, it suggests that there are reasons to worry about the responsiveness of our politicians and our democracy. It suggests that election results are being altered in ways we should be uneasy about and might try to change. We might limit the resources of office holders and impose greater restrictions on their ability to raise campaign funds. But if the trends have not evolved as suggested, then there are fewer reasons to worry and less reason to be cynical. Indeed, if existing trends are a product of a gradual re-sorting of the relationship between parties and the electorate through realignment, there are reasons to see elections of the last several decades in a very different light. They may not reflect the rejection of partisanship, but rather the re-sorting of partisan attachments and the reassertion of the importance of partisanship.

The Consensus about a Greater Incumbency Effect

In 1974 David Mayhew (1974a) called attention to a significant change in House election results. He classified districts as safe if the incumbent won with 60 percent or more of the vote and marginal if the incumbent received less than that. He then compared the frequency of safe and marginal districts for the years 1946–1972. It was clear that the percentage of marginal districts decreased in 1966. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage of House elections involving incumbents who had marginal outcomes from 1956 to 1972. Something happened in 1966 and in subsequent elections involving incumbents. For 1956–1964 an average of 40.4 percent of House incumbent outcomes were marginal. For 1966–1972 the average was 29.7. Subsequent studies confirmed the existence of this trend (Cover and Mayhew, 1977: 63; Krehbiel and Wright, 1983: 143).

Mayhew's speculative, but very plausible, explanation of this change was that members were allocating themselves more of the resources that could be used to increase their visibility, popularity, and vote percentages. Members were sending out more government-funded mail to constituents, allowing them to boost their visibility. They were performing more constituency services, helping constituents with problems. The number of grant-in-aid programs was increasing, allowing members to claim more credit for bringing benefits to the district. They were doing more for their constituents and had more resources to advertise these efforts (Mayhew, 1974a: 310–11, 1974b: 53–60, 84–85). The combination of these activities was creating more positive visibility for members of Congress, making it harder for challengers to make a dent in their electoral fortunes. Incumbents also had more