

Growing District Partisan Homogeneity and the Decline of the Personal Vote in U.S. House Elections

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Despite decline in the magnitude of U.S. House members' personal vote, reelection safety has not been impaired. Oppenheimer's explanation for this seeming paradox rests upon the growing partisan homogeneity of House districts; i.e., incumbents presumably reduced their level of constituency service knowing that any resulting attrition in their personal vote would be compensated by a more substantial partisan vote. My study uncovers some evidence to back up this explanation. I indeed find that members from safer partisan districts have been perceived by constituents as less engaged in constituency activity and that such activity has declined somewhat over time. The electoral consequences of reduction in constituency engagement, however, seem too small to have been a major cause of the attenuation in the personal vote.

More than a quarter century has passed since Charles O. Jones made his famous observation about the saturation of the congressional election field with studies focusing on the incumbency effect:

I am convinced that one more article demonstrating that House incumbents tend to win reelection will induce a spontaneous primal scream among all congressional scholars across the nation (1981, 458).

Yet congressional scholars have managed to come up with interesting new things to say about the topic. One of the most important departures concerns the weakening over time in the part of incumbency safety that arises from members' ability to attract votes on the basis of their personal appeal.

Oppenheimer finds that the election-to-election "surge"—calculated as the average of a party's mean inter-election gain when its candidates run as incumbents for the first time plus the party's mean loss when its incumbents retire—declined in the 1990s after having climbed across the previous four decades (2005, 138-40). More statistically elaborate analysis finds much the same reduction in the power of incumbency (Levitt and Wolfram 1997, 48-49; Brady, D'Onofrio, and Fiorina 2000, 143-44; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006, 84-85), even though the last two of these studies move the onset of incumbency decay back to the early to late 1980s.¹ Finally, Jacobson shows that from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, open-ended comments about House candidates in the biennial surveys of the American National Election Studies (ANES) gradually became more focused on

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political factors (i.e., party, ideology, and policy) and less focused on personal factors (i.e., personal characteristics, performance, and district service). Since comments of the latter kind, on balance, have been notably more positive than those of the former kind, this change has helped undercut the incumbent's personal appeal to the electorate (2004, 140-43).

As noted by Oppenheimer, however, an apparent paradox lies in the fact that while incumbents' personal vote has declined, their overall re-election rates have remained stable. The hypothesis that he offers to resolve this paradox, which shall be the central concern of our own investigation, focuses on the well-documented growth in the partisan homogeneity of House districts since the 1970s (2005, 141-54).² Recent studies by Carson, Crespín, Finocchiaro, and Rohde (2007, 890-91) and by Theriault (2008, 71-78) have assigned some of the responsibility for this growth to the redistricting process; i.e., bipartisan redistricting plans accommodating the wishes of individual Republican and Democratic members for more electoral security, partisan plans packing opposition party voters into a limited number of very safe seats, and plans hoping to increase African-American and Latino congressional representation through creation of "majority-minority" districts with heavily minority populations. Oppenheimer in his own analysis, however, rejects the redistricting explanation, believing instead that increasing partisan homogeneity is largely an inadvertent result of numerous individual decisions made by non-elites about where to live. Newly minted college graduates and retirees may relocate to a new community on the basis of social and cultural affinity with the populace, which, because of the rising convergence of social, cultural, and political identification, means reinforcement of the area's already existing partisan leanings.³

Regardless of which explanation better accounts for why districts have become more solidly Republican or Democratic, the trend according to Oppenheimer has lessened the incentive of affected members to build up their personal vote through aggressive constituency solicitude. Activities such as frequent trips home, casework, and porkbarreling consume member and staff resources that otherwise could be directed toward more inviting policy ventures in Washington. Members who experience a more lopsided balance favoring fellow partisans in their district will therefore tend to slacken in constituency attentiveness, knowing that personal vote losses will be compensated by greater numbers of loyal party voters. In addition, even if such members were to pursue constituent activities as vigorously as before, the payoff would be less because of the existence of fewer opposition partisans potentially susceptible to conversion efforts.⁴

While not dealing as Oppenheimer does with the question of why the overall level of incumbent safety has been maintained despite the declining personal vote, other scholars too, such as Abramowitz, Alexander, and

Gunning (2006, 86), have argued that incumbents have less reason to be aggressive in performing constituent service when the underlying balance of partisanship is substantially on their side. Erikson and Wright further make this point in attempting to explain why members in districts where their party's presidential candidate runs strongly (an indicator of a favorable partisan tilt) tend to receive only about as many votes as he does. Those in more competitive districts, on the other hand, do a good deal better (2009, 82).

It is important to emphasize, however, that these arguments of a substantial district partisan slant retarding the incumbent's constituency engagement and hence the magnitude of his/her personal vote have not been subjected to empirical verification. In fact, there are reasons why the relationship may not be as prominent as claimed. First is the matter of primary elections, where district partisan safety is irrelevant in determining the outcome, but where an opponent might be able to generate a damaging attack that the incumbent has forgotten constituents. In addition, members may fear that representational cutbacks can be politically harmful once constituent expectations of a particular level of district service become rooted (Fenno 1978, 189-91; Fiorina 1981, 548).

Questions exist, therefore, as to how strongly attenuation in the electoral value of incumbency can be tied to the migration of House districts toward greater partisan homogeneity. In what follows, this controversy will be pursued in detail. The main part of the analysis involves development of a simultaneous, two-equation model, which tests whether constituency attentiveness by members from more homogeneous districts really is perceived less positively than that by members from more competitive districts and, if so, what the implications are for incumbent reelection safety. The same kind of analysis is also performed substituting reported constituent contacts with incumbents for perceptions of constituent attentiveness. Later, I determine what has happened to perceptions of constituency attentiveness and contacts with the member over time. If incumbents on the whole actually have become less engaged in these activities, it should show up in constituent responses.

The election period to be studied commences with 1978, the year in which the ANES began to ask respondents its battery of questions pertaining to evaluations of and contact with House members. The end point in my study for a specific investigation depends upon the year of the final survey that included the particular measure of constituency engagement being analyzed; e.g., investigations centered on perceptions of whether the member has done anything special for his/her district must halt in 2000, since no survey afterward included the question. In no case, however, does an analysis stop before 1994, which means that I always will be able to cover at least part of the period during which the electoral advantage of incumbency fell.

Data and Methods

Oppenheimer's hypothesis, as just mentioned, will be examined by means of a simultaneous, two-equation model, which is estimated with bivariate probit analysis. Four different pairs of equations will be generated, each pair corresponding to a specific ANES measure that is available to tap respondents' perceptions of the member's constituency attentiveness or their contact with the member. Consider the first equation pair I estimate, which focuses on whether the member is seen as having done something special for the district. Here,

$$\begin{aligned} 1) y_1^* &= \gamma_1 y_2^* + \beta_1 x_1 + \varepsilon_1 \\ 2) y_2^* &= \beta_2 x_2 + \varepsilon_2. \end{aligned}$$

Equation 1) models voting for or against the incumbent (y_1^*) as a function of the endogenous something special variable (y_2^*), plus a set of exogenous variables (x_1). Equation 2) models something special (y_2^*) as a function of a second set of exogenous variables (x_2), which includes district partisan homogeneity. ε_1 and ε_2 are the disturbance terms. The remaining three pairs of equations are identical, except that y_2^* in each changes to represent a different constituency engagement variable. The underlying causal dynamic, of course, is for partisan homogeneity to indirectly affect voting behavior in the first equation through its influence on constituency engagement in the second equation.

Because the constituency engagement variable in the voting equation is endogenous, I am estimating here a recursive simultaneous equations model. For an analogous recursive system of equations that involved two continuous dependent variables, application of ordinary least squares would yield biased parameters. Greene has shown, however, that when both dependent variables are binary, as are voting and each of the constituency engagement variables that I use, the simultaneity can be disregarded by applying bivariate probit analysis to the estimation (Greene 1998, 292-95; Greene 2003, 715-16).⁵ All parameters will be both consistent and efficient. As with any bivariate probit estimation, correlation between disturbances in the two equations, arising from the possible omission of factors that jointly influence the dependent variables, will be picked up by the ρ coefficient generated in the analysis.

I code the voting choice variable as 1 if the respondent supports the incumbent, and 0 if he/she supports the challenger. The coding of the four constituency engagement variables follows, along with their years of ANES availability:

- Ability to recall anything special done by incumbent for district or people of district (1 if “yes,” 0 if “no”) (1978-1994, 2000)
- Expectation of incumbent’s helpfulness in dealing with future problem of respondent (1 if “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful,” 0 if “not very helpful” or “depends”) (1978-1994)
- Open-ended comments made about incumbent’s constituency attentiveness (1 if there are more positive comments than negative comments, 0 if number of positive comments is same as or less than number of negative comments) (1978-2000)⁶
- Contact with incumbent (1 if respondent met incumbent, attended meeting where incumbent spoke, talked with staff member, received mail from incumbent, read about incumbent in newspaper or magazine, heard incumbent on radio, saw incumbent on TV, or had some other form of contact; 0 if respondent had no contact) (1978-1994).

The first three measures of constituency engagement all bear upon perceptions of the member’s attentiveness. Such perceptual variables have been found to relate to members’ actual constituency activity (e.g., caseload size or frequency of visits home) (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987, 140-53; Rivers and Fiorina 1989, 38-43). The latter kind of data have rarely been employed in previous studies because of the very time-consuming efforts required to obtain them, even when, unlike the case in the present investigation, only a single election year has been chosen for analysis. Reported contact with the incumbent, the fourth measure of constituency engagement, likely is even more closely tied to actual member activity, given that it should be less slanted by whether the constituent’s partisanship is the same as the member’s.

I follow conventional practice by tapping district partisan homogeneity, the exogenous variable in the second equation that is critical to Oppenheimer’s hypothesis, by means of presidential vote returns. Specifically, for Democratic seats the Democratic proportion of the district’s major party presidential vote is computed, minus the mean Democratic proportion across all 435 districts. For Republican districts, partisan homogeneity is the mean Democratic proportion of the presidential vote, minus the district’s Democratic vote proportion. So in all districts, more positive values of the homogeneity measure signify a more lopsided distribution of partisanship favoring the incumbent’s party.

In a presidential election year, the presidential vote returns that are used are from that same year, while in midterms presidential returns from two years earlier are used. An exception, however, must be made in the case of 1992. In 1992 as well as 1982, which are the two election years within my period of study that immediately followed nationwide redistricting, the

ANES asked questions about constituency engagement that related to the incumbent trying for reelection in the new district, who for some respondents was not the incumbent who had been representing them over the past two years. These respondents, therefore, were excluded from both the 1982 and 1992 analyses.⁷ But for 1992 respondents who are retained because they did not change districts, 1992 presidential returns broken down within the new district lines obviously would not reveal the partisan environment in which their incumbent had been operating prior to the election and, according to Oppenheimer's hypothesis, the consequent strength of his/her incentive to maximize constituency attentiveness. Presidential returns from 1992 recalculated within the old district lines would solve this problem, but since such data do not exist, I instead use 1988 presidential returns within the old lines. For the 1982 election, on the other hand, I can simply repeat the standard midterm practice mentioned above of using presidential returns from the immediately preceding presidential election year (1980), computed of course within the old 1980 lines rather than the new lines.

The remaining exogenous variables employed in the two equations of the model serve as controls. In equation 1) explaining pro- or anti-incumbent voting, these control variables include the following: the respondent's party identification, perceptions of economic change, rating of the President, ideology, and rating of Congress; plus a term for the interaction between the Congress rating and whether the respondent's member belongs to the House minority party, and the member's seniority. (The coding of these variables is included in the Appendix). The first four variables, of course, all have been standard determinants of voting behavior in previous studies. Congressional job approval, which sometimes has also been employed, is entered in its original form as well as in the form of an interaction term to account for the finding that evaluations of Congress matter more electorally for members of the party controlling the House than for those in opposition (Hibbing and Tiritilli 2000, 125-27; McDermott and Jones 2003, 163). The coefficient for the interaction term should thus be negative. Finally, the seniority variable accounts for the possibility that members with more service will have established greater name recognition and hence greater ability to attract votes.

In the second equation explaining the member's constituency engagement, the control variables are as follows: the respondent's party identification, the member's party, the member's seniority, the respondent's length of residency in his or her present locality, the respondent's educational level, the respondent's perception of whether public officials care about citizen opinion, and whether the respondent resides in the South. (Once again, the Appendix includes the coding of these variables). Party identification, in light of what was suggested on p. 7, is an essential control variable, because judgments of constituency engagement will be colored somewhat by

whether the respondent shares the incumbent's partisanship. In the more straightforward case of respondent reports of contact with the incumbent, I would expect the effect of partisanship to be more muted, but still present owing to the greater tendency of fellow partisans to assume a higher level of member-initiated contact even when they have no real memory of it. The specific party to which the member belongs is equally obvious for inclusion, since there may be systematic differences between the amount of constituency activity performed by Republicans and Democrats. With regard to seniority, longer serving members simply have had more opportunities to aid constituents and to establish contact. By the same token, longer term residents (at least those who continue to be represented by the same member) have had more opportunities to learn of his or her efforts. Greater educational attainment, because it usually produces more knowledge of and exposure to matters related to public affairs, also should heighten awareness of members' efforts. I further expect that those with benign views about the responsiveness of officeholders in general will be more inclined to view favorably the constituency attentiveness of their own representative; in addition, they would be likelier themselves to initiate contact, anticipating a more satisfactory outcome. Finally, southern residency is included owing to the traditional emphasis placed by southern members on personal interaction and the pursuit of material benefits for their disproportionately less well-off constituencies (Fenno 1978, 47-48).⁸

Because my analysis extends across an extended time span varying between nine and 12 election years, depending upon which of the four constituency engagement variables is being considered, and because many different parameters are generated, a pooled cross-sectional design is used with respondents from all ANES studies containing the relevant data merged together.⁹ This is necessary to make the presentation of the results manageable. As pointed out by Beck, Katz, and Tucker, in a design like mine that combines time-series with cross-sectional data and employs binary dependent variables, there is the risk of temporal dependency among the cases (1998). The consequence can be misleadingly large t-values for the parameters. Their recommendation is to test for temporal dependency by adding $k-1$ dummy variables to differentiate the k periods covered by the analysis, and then to perform a likelihood ratio test of this specification versus the alternative specification excluding the dummy variables (1268-70). When I did this, all resulting χ^2 test statistics for the four models were significant at least at $p \leq .02$. Thus, I deal with this temporal dependency by employing the corrective measure of retaining the dummy variables.

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Table 1 contains the results of estimating the four models. I initially consider the ρ coefficients, which do not achieve statistical significance. Accordingly, the disturbance terms in the equations are not interrelated. Any linkage between equations must only be in the form of constituency engagement in the second equation influencing the decision whether to vote for the incumbent in the first equation.

For the most part, expectations concerning the control variables are upheld in Table 1. In the voting choice equations, the only exceptions are that the member's level of seniority never attains significance, and that respondents represented by a House minority party member are not significantly less likely than those with a majority party member to vote on the basis of Congress evaluations when either the model involving recollections of something special done by the member or the helpfulness model is estimated. In the constituency engagement equations, for control variables where I hypothesized a directional effect, expectations likewise are generally supported, albeit not as strongly. Only southern residency is significant in less than 50 percent of the models. With regard to the control variable of the incumbent's party, where a directional relationship was not hypothesized, no regularity exists. Democratic members are seen as more likely to have done something special for their district, perhaps because of the party's traditionally stronger association with porkbarrel politics.¹⁰ On the other hand, respondents are more likely to report some form of contact with a Republican member. Lockerbie, after uncovering a similar result relating to constituent reports of receiving mail from the incumbent, surmises that GOP members may be trying to compensate through contact like this for their party's perceived deficit in furnishing material benefits (1999, 638). No partisan differences exist in the remaining two models.

The main question that motivated the analysis in Table 1, of course, is whether incumbents whose districts contain a greater share of fellow party identifiers are less active in performing constituency-relevant functions. The equations explaining constituency engagement indicate that the answer is yes. All coefficients of the district partisan homogeneity variable have the hypothesized negative sign and are significant.¹¹ The necessary follow up to this analysis is how the affected constituency engagement variables—this time on the right-hand side of the voting equations—in turn influence respondents' odds of supporting the incumbent. Here, all models conform to expectations, except for that centering on contact with the incumbent, where the coefficient has the correct sign but falls short of significance.¹²

Table 1. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations

Variable	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing
	Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Contact with Incumbent
<i>House Voting Equation</i>					
Constituency engagement variable					
Party identification	.834** (.287)	1.568*** (.313)	1.011** (.415)	.628 (.677)	
Perceived economic change	.610*** (.042)	.577*** (.044)	.654*** (.037)	.653*** (.034)	
Job approval of President	.063** (.021)	.044* (.024)	.052** (.021)	.049* (.023)	
Respondent's ideology	.325*** (.058)	.360*** (.068)	.376*** (.053)	.297*** (.065)	
Job approval of Congress	.172*** (.020)	.146*** (.023)	.185*** (.018)	.153*** (.022)	
Job approval of Congress*Incumbent's affiliation with House minority party	.252*** (.057)	.199*** (.064)	.298*** (.052)	.300*** (.064)	
Incumbent's seniority	-.089 (.079)	-.106 (.091)	-.179** (.072)	-.165* (.090)	
1980	-.001 (.004)	.001 (.004)	-.005 (.004)	.002 (.004)	
1982	-.110 (.098)	-.159 (.108)	-.208* (.096)	-.152 (.100)	
1984	-.311* (.122)	-.184 (.136)	-.365** (.123)	-.311* (.124)	
1986	-.066 (.091)	-.111 (.100)	-.068 (.091)	-.123 (.108)	
1988	-.098 (.124)	-.010 (.140)	-.145 (.125)	-.138 (.129)	
1990	.114 (.103)	.063 (.111)	.056 (.104)	.041 (.104)	
1992	.084 (.110)	.090 (.119)	.005 (.107)	-.002 (.107)	
1994	-.068 (.105)	-.088 (.118)	-.120 (.100)	-.114 (.103)	
1996	-.237* (.098)	-.159 (.110)	-.262** (.099)	-.275** (.098)	
1998	—	—	-.148 (.107)	—	
2000	—	—	-.232* (.113)	—	
Constant	-.490*** (.147)	-.1436*** (.309)	-.429** (.143)	-.722 (.638)	

... table continues

Table 1. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations (continued)

Variable	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing
	Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Contact with Incumbent
	<i>Constituency Engagement Equation</i>				
District partisan homogeneity	-.942*** (.213)	-.495* (.273)	-.884*** (.214)	-.884*** (.214)	-1.495*** (.334)
Party identification	.162*** (.022)	.284*** (.029)	.133*** (.021)	.133*** (.021)	-.000 (.033)
Incumbent's party	-.148*** (.043)	-.052 (.059)	-.044 (.041)	-.044 (.041)	.151* (.068)
Incumbent's seniority	.011*** (.003)	-.001 (.004)	.015*** (.003)	.015*** (.003)	.006 (.005)
Length of residency in present locality	.050*** (.007)	.014 (.009)	.039*** (.007)	.039*** (.007)	.050*** (.009)
Educational level	.095*** (.017)	-.067 (.024)	.062*** (.016)	.062*** (.016)	.066*** (.025)
Public officials care	.086** (.029)	.376*** (.041)	.064** (.027)	.064** (.027)	.038 (.046)
Southern residency	.122** (.049)	.043 (.070)	.013 (.048)	.013 (.048)	.020 (.078)
1980	-.285*** (.085)	-.058 (.116)	.072 (.087)	.072 (.087)	-.229 (.117)
1982	.006 (.100)	-.140 (.139)	.085 (.105)	.085 (.105)	.212 (.165)
1984	-.109 (.075)	-.006 (.106)	-.109 (.080)	-.109 (.080)	-.066 (.129)
1986	-.207* (.104)	-.237 (.134)	-.049 (.107)	-.049 (.107)	-.104 (.147)
1988	-.347*** (.092)	-.522*** (.128)	-.070 (.093)	-.070 (.093)	-.039 (.146)
1990	-.499*** (.097)	-.621*** (.130)	-.197* (.098)	-.197* (.098)	-.053 (.140)
1992	-.247** (.087)	-.108 (.118)	-.100 (.089)	-.100 (.089)	-.068 (.127)
1994	-.351*** (.088)	-.668*** (.114)	-.258** (.092)	-.258** (.092)	-.154 (.134)
1996	—	—	-.432*** (.091)	-.432*** (.091)	—
1998	—	—	-.320** (.114)	-.320** (.114)	—
2000	-.373*** (.094)	—	-.348*** (.098)	-.348*** (.098)	—
Constant	-1.250*** (.109)	1.241*** (.145)	-1.377*** (.109)	-1.377*** (.109)	.767*** (.156)
ρ	-.223 (.180)	-.258 (.180)	-.124 (.252)	-.124 (.252)	-.065 (.342)

... table continues

Table 1. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations (continued)

Variable	Model Employing Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Model Employing Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Model Employing Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Model Employing Contact with Incumbent
Marginal effect of district partisan homogeneity on House vote	-.052 (.051)	-.009 (.008)	-.026 (.060)	-.006 (.033)
Log likelihood	-4510.942	-2720.245	-5061.475	-2566.995
N of cases	4590	3738	5663	3738

Note: Entries in parentheses are robust standard errors of bivariate probit coefficients. Only respondents voting for major party candidates in districts with two-party competition are included in estimation.
 ***Significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level. Significance levels based upon one-tail t-tests; however, two-tail tests used for incumbent's party, election year, constant, and ρ coefficients, where no direction is hypothesized.

I must go further, however, to determine more precisely the magnitude of the impact that increasing partisan homogeneity has on the incumbent vote. Toward this end, the marginal effects of partisan homogeneity, computed at the means of all other independent variables, are presented at the bottom of Table 1.¹³ Because the variable appears only in the constituency engagement equation, its marginal effect on voting is indirect; i.e., it affects the probability that a constituency engagement variable will have the value of 1 (higher engagement), which in turn affects the probability that the vote variable will have a value of 1 (a pro-incumbent vote). The marginal effects in all four models fail to be statistically significant. Even the largest effect (-.052), exerted in the model involving recollections of something special, signifies that a 10 percentage point gain in district partisan homogeneity only translates into a .52 percentage point drop in the constituent's probability of casting a pro-incumbent vote. Considering that the actual mean value of the partisan homogeneity measure used in my analysis has risen by 5.3 percentage points across the 1978-2004 period (i.e., from .047 to .100), these results suggest that the trend toward safer districts likely bears only modest responsibility for the weakening of the personal vote.¹⁴

But while support for the hypothesis is insufficiently robust to account for much of the overall decline in the personal vote, perhaps stronger support at least would emerge for voters who do not identify with the incumbent's party. The relevant reasoning is straightforward. The personal vote disproportionately is produced by the member's individual appeal drawing support from opposition party defectors as well as independents. Such voters in forming their perceptions of the member's constituency engagement should be particularly sensitive to the actual amount of member activity, and these perceptions should be especially important in determining whether they will then follow through with their votes. In contrast, incumbent party identifiers, as pointed out above, will likely be predisposed toward higher rankings of attentiveness and assumptions of a higher level of member-initiated contact even without a high level of actual incumbent performance, and the same should be true of their electoral support.

Table 2 therefore addresses this possibility by repeating the bivariate probit analyses with incumbent party respondents excluded. The variable indicating respondents' party identification, of course, now takes on simply the values of -1 for non-incumbent party members and 0 for independents. (Table 2 about here) For the most part, the effects of the control variables in both equations replicate what was found earlier. The most prominent exception is the failure of respondents' party identification to affect any of the constituency engagement measures except perceptions of helpfulness, presumably because of its narrower range of variation in the present analysis. Also, respondents no longer see an advantage for Democratic incumbents in doing something special or for Republicans in contacting constituents.

**Table 2. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations—
Only Voters of District Non-Incumbent Party and Independents Included**

Variable	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing
	Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Model Employing Contact with Incumbent	Model Employing Contact with Incumbent
<i>House Voting Equation</i>					
Constituency engagement variable	1.095*** (.314)	1.741*** (.362)	1.529*** (.452)	.183 (1.021)	.183 (1.021)
Party identification	.520*** (.095)	.565*** (.121)	.713*** (.091)	.561*** (.099)	.561*** (.099)
Perceived economic change	.048* (.023)	.016 (.027)	.052* (.024)	.029 (.027)	.029 (.027)
Job approval of President	.297*** (.073)	.339*** (.087)	.359*** (.068)	.311*** (.084)	.311*** (.084)
Respondent's ideology	.182*** (.025)	.157*** (.029)	.183*** (.023)	.176*** (.029)	.176*** (.029)
Job approval of Congress	.365*** (.074)	.352*** (.082)	.381*** (.070)	.479*** (.084)	.479*** (.084)
Job approval of Congress*Incumbent's affiliation with House minority party	-.186* (.094)	-.217* (.113)	-.229** (.087)	-.315** (.112)	-.315** (.112)
Incumbent's seniority	-.003 (.005)	.002 (.005)	-.009 (.005)	.002 (.005)	.002 (.005)
1980	.053 (.119)	-.026 (.136)	-.109 (.117)	-.035 (.126)	-.035 (.126)
1982	-.314* (.156)	-.230 (.171)	-.349* (.159)	-.283 (.163)	-.283 (.163)
1984	.001 (.112)	-.038 (.126)	.045 (.114)	-.056 (.142)	-.056 (.142)
1986	-.096 (.152)	-.026 (.179)	-.195 (.149)	-.196 (.162)	-.196 (.162)
1988	.069 (.120)	-.011 (.134)	-.024 (.123)	-.028 (.125)	-.028 (.125)
1990	.152 (.137)	.161 (.157)	.048 (.137)	.069 (.140)	.069 (.140)
1992	.021 (.130)	.068 (.154)	-.024 (.125)	-.030 (.129)	-.030 (.129)
1994	-.238 (.123)	-.156 (.145)	-.295* (.121)	-.331** (.122)	-.331** (.122)
1996	—	—	-.240 (.124)	—	—
1998	—	—	-.151 (.145)	—	—
2000	-.259* (.132)	—	-.255 (.134)	—	—
Constant	-.672*** (.178)	-1.660*** (.379)	-.459** (.169)	-.504 (.972)	-.504 (.972)

... table continues

**Table 2. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations—
Only Voters of District Non-Incumbent Party and Independents Included (continued)**

Variable	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing	Model Employing
	Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Contact with Incumbent	Model Employing Contact with Incumbent
	<i>Constituency Engagement Equation</i>				
District partisan homogeneity	-.896* (.390)	-.798* (.416)	-.565 (.373)	-1.830** (.625)	
Party identification	.128 (.091)	.236* (.114)	-.023 (.093)	.038 (.140)	
Incumbent's party	-.105 (.068)	.002 (.084)	-.098 (.066)	.094 (.109)	
Incumbent's seniority	.018*** (.005)	.000 (.006)	.021*** (.004)	.012 (.008)	
Length of residency in present locality	.041*** (.010)	.027* (.012)	.028** (.010)	.024 (.015)	
Educational level	.129*** (.026)	-.048 (.033)	.070** (.026)	.039 (.040)	
Public officials care	.131** (.044)	.345*** (.056)	.128** (.043)	.007 (.072)	
Southern residency	.156* (.075)	-.064 (.093)	.072 (.075)	-.123 (.120)	
1980	-.359** (.129)	-.100 (.157)	.122 (.133)	-.221 (.170)	
1982	.005 (.156)	-.094 (.200)	.126 (.161)	.390 (.273)	
1984	-.173 (.115)	-.053 (.146)	-.195 (.127)	.177 (.206)	
1986	-.347* (.169)	-.436* (.184)	.011 (.174)	.176 (.261)	
1988	-.482*** (.143)	-.536** (.174)	-.124 (.150)	.157 (.224)	
1990	-.552*** (.160)	-.718*** (.181)	-.147 (.161)	-.083 (.212)	
1992	-.254* (.128)	-.341* (.154)	-.118 (.135)	-.010 (.192)	
1994	-.583*** (.139)	-.820*** (.158)	-.347** (.145)	-.138 (.199)	
1996	—	—	-.447** (.142)	—	
1998	—	—	-.407* (.175)	—	
2000	-.536*** (.150)	—	-.535*** (.163)	—	
Constant	-1.398*** (.183)	1.141*** (.230)	-1.569*** (.184)	1.083*** (.275)	
ρ	-.389 (.206)	-.395 (.254)	-.377 (.299)	.173 (.500)	

... table continues

**Table 2. Bivariate Probit Estimation of House Voting and Constituency Engagement Equations—
Only Voters of District Non-Incumbent Party and Independents Included (continued)**

Variable	Model Employing Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Model Employing Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Model Employing Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Model Employing Contact with Incumbent
Marginal effect of district partisan homogeneity on House vote	-.108* (.058)	-.051 (.044)	-.058 (.050)	.030 (.086)
Log likelihood	-2392.040	-1719.014	-2670.283	-1493.430
N of cases	2074	1653	2561	1680

Note: Entries in parentheses are robust standard errors of bivariate probit coefficients. Only respondents voting for major party candidates in districts with two-party competition are included in estimation.
 ***Significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level. Significance levels based upon one-tail t-tests; however, two-tail tests used for incumbent's party, election year, constant, and ρ coefficients, where no direction is hypothesized.

With regard to the variable of central importance, restricting the analysis to non-incumbent party and independent respondents clearly enhances the marginal effect of district partisan homogeneity on pro-incumbent voting in the model dealing with something special. A 10 percentage point rise in homogeneity makes for a statistically significant 1.08 percentage point reduction in incumbent backing, rather than the insignificant reduction of .52 percentage point recorded before. Marginal effects in the models dealing with expectations of helpfulness and open-ended comments about constituency attentiveness likewise become more negative, but not to the point of significance. Furthermore, partisan homogeneity now fails to significantly affect perceptions of constituency engagement in the latter of these two models. Finally, contact with the incumbent fails as before to affect voting, but its marginal effect now takes on the wrong negative sign. So restricting the pool of respondents only to those whose behavior should be more in accordance with the hypothesis yields, at best, mixed results.

Changes in Members' Constituency Engagement over Time

The final analysis I perform sheds some additional light on the hypothesis's validity. This analysis is less elaborate than the one just completed. Obviously, the idea that growing district partisan homogeneity has been behind the decay in the personal vote rests upon the bedrock assumption that constituency engagement has, in fact, waned. Here, I investigate whether such a trend actually occurred with regard to each of the four constituency measures. Table 3 presents the mean values of the measures for voters in districts with major party competition, calculated in each election year where the relevant ANES data exist. Figure 1 displays the trends in graphical form.

Regressions of the constituency engagement means on a time variable, starting with the value of 1 in 1978 and ending with whatever value corresponds to the final election year for which the appropriate data exist, show that there is a downward trend in all four instances. But only in the regressions for expectations of helpfulness (-.005) and open-ended comments about constituency attentiveness (-.006) are the time variable coefficients significant. At the other extreme, the coefficient in the equation for incumbent contact is of trivial magnitude, indicating average biennial decline of merely .1 percentage point.¹⁵ I thus conclude that a degree of decline has occurred in voter perceptions of member constituency engagement. But this decline—at least decline meeting the standard of statistical significance—has been irregular, manifested for some but not all measures of engagement.¹⁶

If districts with greater partisan homogeneity give rise to incumbents with less constituency engagement, and if constituency engagement in the

Table 3. Voter Perceptions of Members' Constituency Engagement

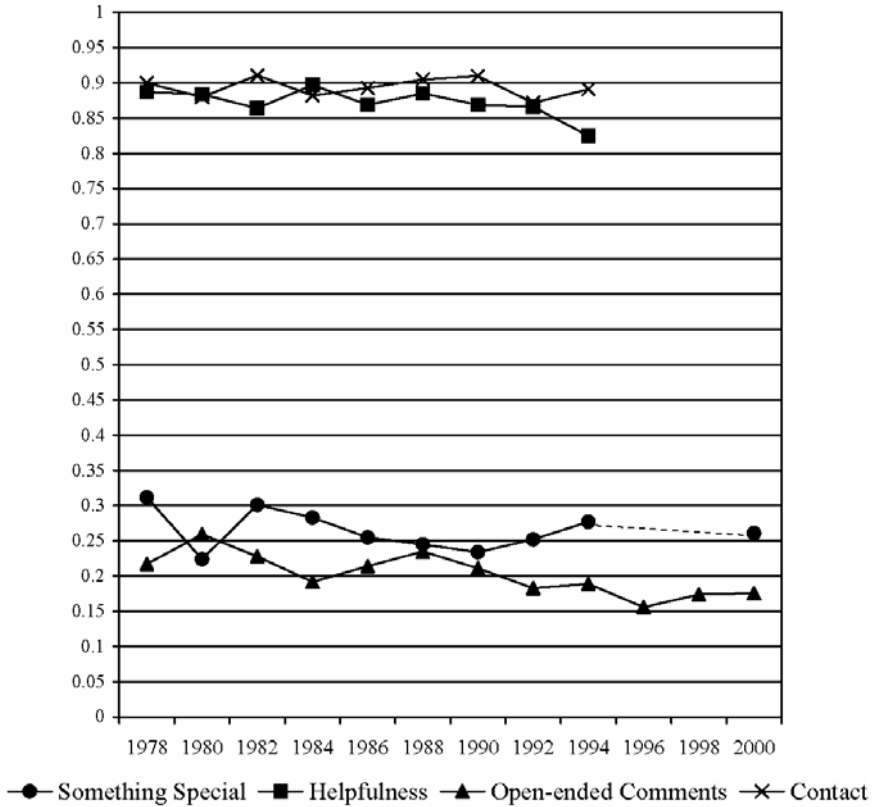
Year	Recall of Something Special Done by Incumbent	Expectation of Incumbent's Helpfulness	Open-ended Comments about Incumbent's Constituency Attentiveness	Contact with Incumbent
1978	.312 (756)	.887 (662)	.217 (757)	.900 (757)
1980	.224 (710)	.884 (610)	.259 (706)	.880 (711)
1982	.301 (528)	.864 (457)	.228 (530)	.911 (530)
1984	.283 (948)	.897 (878)	.192 (964)	.882 (500)
1986	.255 (702)	.869 (636)	.214 (702)	.893 (700)
1988	.245 (755)	.885 (698)	.235 (758)	.905 (758)
1990	.234 (531)	.869 (488)	.211 (532)	.910 (532)
1992	.252 (975)	.866 (900)	.183 (1052)	.872 (985)
1994	.277 (711)	.825 (656)	.189 (718)	.891 (718)
1996	— —	— —	.156 (916)	— —
1998	— —	— —	.174 (385)	— —
2000	.261 (636)	— —	.176 (669)	— —
Regression of Constituency Engagement (y) on Time (t)	$y = .281 - .003t$	$y = .897 - .005t^*$	$y = .245 - .006t^{**}$	$y = .897 - .001t$

Note: Entries are mean values of voter perceptions of constituency engagement by members. Only respondents voting for major party candidates in districts with two-party competition are included. Results for 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000 have been weighted. Numbers of cases are in parentheses.

***Significant at .001 level (one-tail t-test); **significant at .01 level (one-tail t-test); *significant at .05 level (one-tail t-test).

aggregate has declined—albeit irregularly—over time, then why did I find in the previous section that the marginal effects of partisan homogeneity on the vote were too weak to account for more than a small part of the erosion in incumbents' personal vote over time? Perhaps Oppenheimer's theory is too centered on what has happened to the **levels** of constituency engagement over time, without considering changes in the degree to which engagement may have been **converted** into support for the incumbent. Fiorina has suggested that while the rise in constituency service activities may have fueled the late 1960s surge in electoral safety, constituents later became jaded by such activities as the novelty wore off and, as a result, less likely to reward the member (2005, 167). By the same token, therefore, growing indifference implies that any reduced levels of constituency engagement issuing from elevated district partisan homogeneity should concern voters less over time, causing diminished damage at the polls.

Figure 1. Voter Perceptions of Members' Constituency Engagement, Displayed in Graphical Form



Support for this speculation emerges in my own analysis when the four models of Table 1 are reestimated employing only election years beginning with 1990. Originally, the variables involving something special, expectations of helpfulness, and open-ended comments all had significant effects on voting for the incumbent, but only helpfulness remains significant in the analysis extending from 1990 onward. The parameter for contact with the incumbent, which before was somewhat smaller than its standard error, now shrinks to a value barely above zero. So in the full analysis of Table 1, inclusion of the more recent election years prevented whatever drops in constituency engagement that were produced by increased partisan homogeneity from taking a worse overall toll on members' personal vote.

Summary and Conclusions

Congressional incumbents are placed in an enviable situation by my finding that fall-off in constituency engagement engendered by more solidly partisan districts has caused little damage to their personal vote. Cutting back on the oftentimes tedious and time-consuming work of constituency service frees up energy and resources that can be diverted to more absorbing activities like policy-making, while posing only minor electoral risk. It is not simply the case, as argued by Oppenheimer, that the larger numbers of incumbent party identifiers concentrated within one's constituency will offset losses in the personal vote; in fact, the magnitude of these personal vote losses themselves is smaller than in the past.

Members' greater freedom to pursue policy interests, not surprisingly, has taken the form of more legislative activity geared toward one or the other ideological pole, in correspondence with the more lopsided ideological makeup of their districts and reinforced by their own ideological proclivities. The role played by the changing composition of congressional districts in the growing polarization of Congress, to be sure, has sometimes been exaggerated. Many factors divorced from district partisan composition have been at least as important. Mann cites, for example, the replacement in the South of conservative Democrats by conservative Republicans and liberal, preponderantly minority Democrats, the rise of partisan cable television and radio talk programs, and the growing nationalization of congressional campaigns (2006, 264-65). But he also convincingly shows that for Democratic and Republican members alike, roll call extremity is greater when the dominance of their party back home, measured by the vote received by its presidential candidate, increases (2006, 275-79). Likewise, Theriault's analysis suggests that about 30 percent of the increased polarization on House roll call votes that occurred from 1973-74 to 2003-04 was brought about by elevated partisan homogeneity in the districts (2008, 106).

The clear-cut losers in this polarized environment are those constituents whose own policy views seriously depart from the increasingly liberal or conservative views of their representative. In the not so distant past, Ansola-behere, Snyder, and Stewart were able to suggest that the congressional system might in fact comprise "the best of all possible worlds"; i.e., members by following their own partisan instincts contributed to a more responsible party system, at the same time that voters who disagreed with these views were at least compensated with ample constituency service benefits (2000, 31). But in a new era where members in their ever more secure electoral bastions no longer feel the same need to supply such side-payments, this sub-set of voters now faces the prospect of the worst of all possible worlds in the sense of being shut out of both the policy and non-policy benefits that the representational process can afford.

APPENDIX

Coding of Control Variables Used in Equation 1)

- Party identification (1 if respondent is strong or weak identifier with party of incumbent, or independent leaner; 0 if pure independent; -1 if strong or weak identifier with non-incumbent party, or independent leaner)
- Perceived economic change (for respondent with House incumbent of presidential party, 3 if nation's economy seen as better over past year, 2 if seen as same, 1 if seen as worse; for respondent with incumbent of non-presidential party, coding is reversed)¹⁷
- Job approval of President (for respondent with House incumbent of presidential party, 1 if approves, 0 if disapproves; for respondent of non-presidential party, coding is reversed)
- Respondent's ideology (for respondents with Republican member, values range from 1 for most liberal response to 7 for most conservative response on ANES scale of liberalism/conservatism; for respondents with Democratic member, values are reversed)
- Job approval of Congress (1 if approves, 0 if disapproves)¹⁸
- Job approval of Congress*Incumbent's affiliation with House minority party (Interaction between respondent's rating of Congress and whether respondent's member belongs to House minority party (1 if belongs, 0 if doesn't belong))
- Incumbent's seniority (years since respondent's member was first elected to House)¹⁹
- Election year fixed effects (dummy variables used to differentiate election years included in each pooled cross-sectional analysis; 1978 always is the omitted category)

Coding of Control Variables Used in Equation 2)

- Party identification (as defined above)
 - Incumbent's party (1 if Republican, 0 if Democratic)
 - Incumbent's seniority (as defined above)
 - Length of residency in present locality (.25 if respondent was resident for less than six months, 1.25 for six months to two years, 4 for three to five years, 7.5 for six to nine years, 10 for ten or more years)²⁰
 - Educational level (1 if respondent has no more than eighth grade education, 2 if ninth to eleventh grade, 3 if high school diploma, 4 if some college or junior/community college degree, 5 if Bachelor's degree, 6 if advanced degree)
 - Public officials care (1 if respondent disagrees with statement that public officials don't care what people like him/herself think, 0 if agrees)
 - Southern residency (1 if respondent resides in one of 11 states of old Confederacy, Kentucky, or Oklahoma; 0 otherwise)
 - Election year fixed effects (as defined above)
-

NOTES

¹However, a model estimated by Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning that not only accounts for incumbency's direct effect on the vote, but also for its indirect effect in determining the incumbent's level of campaign spending vis-à-vis the challenger's, does not find substantial fall-off in the incumbency effect until after the early 1990s (2006, 85-86).

²See Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani for an in-depth treatment of the trend toward greater partisan uniformity in congressional districts (2003, 17-129).

³Oppenheimer does say, however, that in cases where those in charge of redistricting wish to concentrate voters for purposes of bolstering district electoral safety, this pattern of population mobility aids them in achieving their goal (2005, 153).

⁴Another possible motivation for incumbents to devote less time to their districts is simply that local media coverage of members may have diminished over time. Thus, the electoral payoff to members would diminish if it became more difficult to inform constituents of just what benefits they had delivered. This possibility is made less likely, however, by the fact that voters in the biennial ANES surveys actually have become **more** rather than less able to indicate what they like or dislike about their incumbent. Based upon data across seven different elections presented by Jacobson, I calculated that in 1978, 1984, and 1988, the average number of open-ended positive and negative comments never rose above 1.40 per respondent, whereas in 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000, the average number never was lower than 1.62 (Jacobson 2004, 139).

⁵Additional applications of bivariate probit under similar circumstances involving a recursive simultaneous equations model include Rhine, Greene, and Toussaint-Comeau (2006, 149-50), and White and Wolaver (2003, 149).

⁶The relevant comments here, coded from 321 through 332 in the ANES, deal with helping constituents on a personal level, representing district views, keeping people well-informed about governmental matters, listening to constituents, helping the local economy, and helping district interests. Up to four positive and four negative comments were coded from 1978 through 1986; thereafter, the number rose to five.

⁷On a much more limited scale, mid-decade redistricting also affected some of the other election years analyzed in this study. When the ANES did not provide information that would permit identification of which respondents in the affected states had been shifted to a new district, I simply eliminated all respondents in districts undergoing significant boundary alterations according to the relevant editions of *Politics in America* (e.g., the Texas 26th district prior to the 1984 election or the Georgia 4th district prior to the 1996 election).

⁸For a suggestion that southern Congress members may have shifted more recently toward a more policy-oriented style of representation, see Fenno (2000, 147-52).

⁹The mean number of respondents per House district varies from 4.6 in the analysis focusing on open-ended evaluations of constituency attentiveness to 5.0 in the analysis dealing with perceptions of the member's future helpfulness.

¹⁰An alternative explanation might be that the perceived Democratic advantage in doing something special for constituents is a function of better ability to deliver material benefits because of Democratic control of the House across most of the period I consider. From 1978 to 1994, voters gave higher marks to Democrats than to Republicans in all nine election years, and six of these differences were significant according to t-tests. But in 2000, the one year of Republican control for which the necessary data exist, a significant Democratic advantage likewise existed, suggesting that inter-party differences per se rather than majority party control is what matters.

¹¹In order to accommodate the possibility that partisan homogeneity would have diminishing returns on constituency engagement as districts became increasingly secure for one party, I also tried entering the variable in natural log form. (So that no logarithm would be taken of a non-positive number, I first added to each original value of partisan homogeneity the value of .238, since -.237 was the most negative original value in existence across all respondents). Only in the case of the model involving constituent contact

with the incumbent, however, did the change make the log likelihood less negative, and even in this case the improvement judged by a χ^2 test was not significant.

¹²Expanding the number of respondents to include those in districts without major party competition made for little change in the results. In particular, all three parameters of the constituency engagement variables that were significant in the first equation remain significant in the expanded analysis, and the same is true for all parameters of partisan homogeneity in the second equation.

¹³Discussions of the calculation of marginal effects in the bivariate probit case may be found in Greene (1998, 297-300; 2003, 716-17).

¹⁴When the analysis is redone including only respondents from northern states (and removing, of course, the southern residency variable from the second equation), all four marginal effects become even weaker.

¹⁵As an alternative way of computing change in constituency attentiveness over time, I also compared the 1978-86 averages of the entries reported in Table 3 with the averages from 1988 to the final election year that included the relevant data. T-tests of the differences showed that open-ended comments about constituency attentiveness, as before, became less positive. Decline in perceptions of incumbent helpfulness this time, however, was only significant at $p \leq .10$, since the alternative technique is less affected by the relatively sharp drop-off in the magnitude of the variable that occurs in the final year of the series.

¹⁶It is possible that the procedure in Table 3 is slanted against finding steeper declines in constituency engagement. Growing partisan homogeneity means a larger share of district voters who affiliate with the incumbent party, and these voters' perceptions are likely to be relatively resistant to actual slackening of incumbent activity. I thus dealt with the possibility of bias by repeating the analysis separately for incumbent party identifiers, and for non-incumbent party identifiers and independents combined together. The results showed that the two groupings of voters have virtually identical trends relating to perceptions of something special, open-ended comments, and contact, with significance reached only in the case of open-ended comments. Decline in expectations of helpfulness is significant for opposition party voters and independents, but not for incumbent party voters. So each grouping closely mirrors at least three of the four trends that existed in Table 3 when partisanship was not controlled, thus implying only a minimal possibility of bias there.

¹⁷Since respondents were not asked about the national economy per se in 1978, I instead relied upon their assessment of how business conditions had changed over the previous year.

¹⁸In 1978, respondents had no opportunity to say directly whether they approved or disapproved of Congress's job performance. Instead, they made their evaluations on a 5-point scale. Consequently, I treated "very good" and "good" ratings as indicating approval (1), and "poor" and "very poor" ratings as indicating disapproval (0). "Fair" ratings were assigned the value of .5.

¹⁹Seniority is measured with regard to continuous service. Members initially victorious in special elections have their seniority computed to one decimal point.

²⁰The coding here is similar to that of Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980, 120). Because the original codes of the ANES changed somewhat starting in 2000, my first two categories had to be altered as of that time so that those with less than one year of residency were given a value of .5 and those with one to two years of residency were given 1.5.

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