

Reconsidering “Reconsidering the Trend in Incumbent Vote Percentages in House Elections”: A Comment

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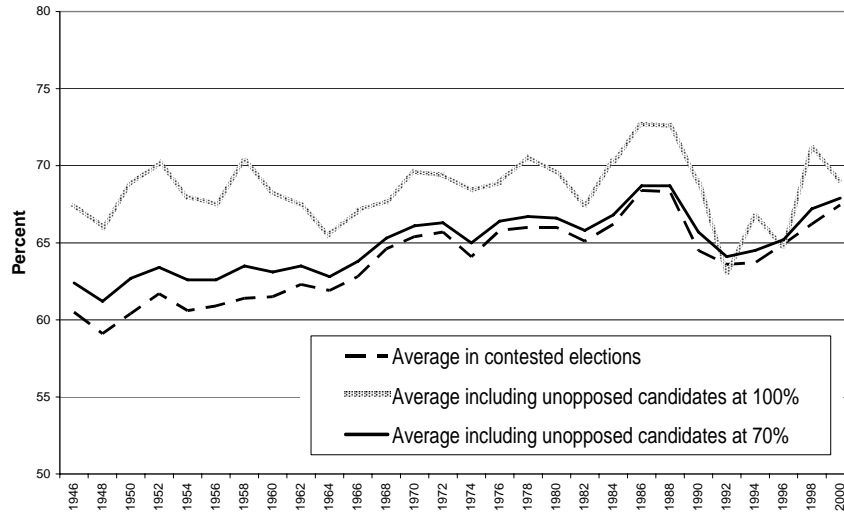
Jeffrey M. Stonecash’s “Reconsidering the Trend in Incumbent Vote Percentages in House Elections” (2003) is a misguided attempt to offer a revisionist view of the increase in the electoral advantage enjoyed by House incumbents that occurred during the 1960s. His central argument is that one indicator of this trend, the mean vote percentage won by incumbent candidates in contested elections, distorts incumbent support because it leaves out uncontested races. Because the number of uncontested races varies over time, the tally for a fluctuating number of strong incumbents—so well entrenched no one even takes them on—is left out of the average vote, rendering the measure inaccurate. When this oversight is corrected, there is no trend.

Omission of uncontested incumbents does distort the trend, but Stonecash’s alternative measure of the average incumbent’s vote share produces a much more serious distortion. He simply adds the uncontested races to the analysis, with unopposed incumbents entered as having received 100 percent of the vote (or, presumably, whatever share they got against non-major party competition). This is clearly an inaccurate measure of the popular support enjoyed by these incumbents—which is what scholars are trying to measure in this line of research—for with no alternative on the ballot, voters favoring the other major party’s candidates have no way of being counted. We can get a reasonable estimate of the support unopposed incumbents would have received had they faced major party opposition by looking at how they did in adjacent elections (either the previous election year or following election year) in which they did face major party competition. The average is about 71 percent (with a standard deviation of about 10 percentage points), which means that Stonecash’s procedure overstates their support by an average of about 29 percentage points (Jacobson 1993).

If we rerun Stonecash’s analysis giving uncontested incumbents 70 percent rather than 100 percent of the vote, the trend parallels the trend for contested seats quite closely (Figure 1). The means for incumbents with major party opponents are, for example, 61.0 percent 1946-1964, 65.2 percent

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Figure 1. Average Vote for House Incumbents, 1946-2000

1966-1984; when we included unopposed incumbents but attribute to them a more plausible level of electoral support, the respective means for the two periods are 62.8 percent and 65.9 percent. The regression and correlation coefficients in the lower half of Stonecash's Table 1 become large and significant,¹ contradicting the article's central argument.

Comparing contested and all incumbent races in this manner indicates that the rise in incumbent vote shares was certainly real, but that omitting uncontested races exaggerates the increase in incumbent's average support by a little more than one percentage point. Thus the upward trend did happen, but it was a bit less steep than the exclusive focus on contested races would lead us to believe. Interesting, perhaps, but the differences shown on the chart hardly require that we abandon the prevailing view that incumbents vote margins increased.

Of course, as Stonecash is well aware, the scholars who developed the literature on the rising incumbency advantage did not rest their case on the average incumbent's share of votes; they were more sophisticated than that. Mayhew's "vanishing marginals" argument does not depend on the exclusion of uncontested races; in fact, he includes them in his well-known frequency distribution charts and in his summary data (1974a). The pioneering work by Erikson (1972), later analyses of the "sophomore surge" and "retirement slump" (e.g., Alford and Brady 1981), and the Gelman-King estimate of the incumbency advantage (Gelman and King 1990) all measure the value of incumbency by comparing the performance of a party's candi-

dates in the same district with and without an incumbent running. None of the results of these studies, all of which report a substantial rise in the vote value of incumbency in the 1960s, are challenged (or even seriously addressed) by Stonecash's approach. Other work that, following Mayhew, uses categorical measures of incumbent marginality—e.g., receiving less than 55 or 60 percent of the vote—is also untouched by Stonecash's critique because these measures already include unopposed candidates. And here, too, the changes over time in the distribution of marginal incumbents show substantial, if irregular, decline in the proportion of incumbents with vote shares falling below the specified margin (e.g., Jacobson 2001, 27).

Stonecash also takes previous scholars to task for ignoring the vote for minor party candidates, focusing exclusively on candidates' shares of the major party vote. But the average total minor party vote share in postwar House elections is only 1.6 percent, and during the 1956-1972 period singled out in Stonecash's analysis, it was a mere 0.6 percent (Rusk 2001, 220-21; in Ornstein, Mann and Malbin's data [2002, 63], the equivalent figures are 1.8 percent and 1.0 percent, respectively). Thus if omission of minor party votes had any effect at all on analytical results, it could only have been tiny and certainly too small to change any substantive conclusion about what happened.

Although the subject has been studied intensively now for more than 30 years, scholars are still arguing about the origins and developing new insights into the rise of the House incumbency advantage (at least as measured by vote share) that appeared during the 1960s (see, for example, Cox and Katz 2002). But there is no shortage of evidence far more compelling than Stonecash's confirming that the rise really did occur.

On a final point, readers should be aware that at least one of the article's attributions is inaccurate. Stonecash writes that David Mayhew "argued that a party perspective was of little use in trying to understand member behavior and House elections (Mayhew 1974b, 27)" (ms. p. 2). But the passage cited does not refer to elections at all; Mayhew was arguing that party was not analytically useful in understanding the way Congress (as he analyzed it in the early 1970s) operated. Nowhere to my knowledge has Mayhew ever suggested that "a party perspective" is "of little use in trying to understand . . . House elections," nor can I imagine that he would ever make such a silly claim.² I pointed out this misrepresentation all three times I refereed this paper for a succession of journals, so it is annoying to have it reappear in print.

NOTES

¹For 1946-2000, $B=.096$, $r^2=.60$, $p<.001$; for 1956-1972, $B=.228$, $r^2=.77$, $p=.002$.

²To mention but one consideration, it is no secret that party identification is the single best predictor of the House vote in every American National Election Study conducted over the last fifty years.

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