Response to Gary C. Jacobson

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The purpose in presenting results about the trend in the vote proportions of House incumbents since 1946 is to prompt a reconsideration of the conventional wisdom. What seems very clear to others—that incumbents are increasing their vote proportions, resulting in declining competition—is not so clear to me. Jacobson offers a criticism of including uncontested results and cites two other trends to reinforce the conclusion that vote proportions are increasing.

Uncontested Races and Popular Support: First, he argues that "adding uncontested races to the analysis . . . with whatever [vote] share they got . . . is clearly an inaccurate measure of the popular support enjoyed by incumbents—which is what scholars are trying to measure . . ." This constitutes changing the meaning of the variable to save the analysis. It is difficult to find statements in studies that vote proportions are taken as reflecting popular support. It is just the proportion of the vote cast that incumbents received. Popular support has many implications which are not part of vote proportions. It implies voters know the candidates and their policy positions and the vote reflects a positive vote for the candidate. This is a heroic leap in interpretation. As someone who has conducted polls for candidates for years, it is clear that vote levels are often cast in ignorance of the candidates and are driven by party identification, differentials in visibility of the two candidates, and societal conditions. If we were to start including and excluding cases on the basis of whether votes reflect true levels of popular support, given existing data, we would have to cease doing analyses. It is a dubious proposition to reject the vote for an unopposed incumbent while accepting 80 percent for an incumbent with a sacrificial lamb opponent with no money who does nothing during a campaign. One year it was my job to tell a Member of Congress, who I polled for, that he should not delude himself about his level of public support, after a race against a local ballerina who left town for much of the campaign and said afterward she did it for a lark.

Jacobson also cites the decline in marginal seats and the rise of the incumbency advantage as supporting evidence. While my analysis focuses only on vote proportions, some comments on these matters are also in order.

The Decline in Marginal Seats: There is no ambiguity that the percentage of House incumbents winning with less than 60 percent of the vote has

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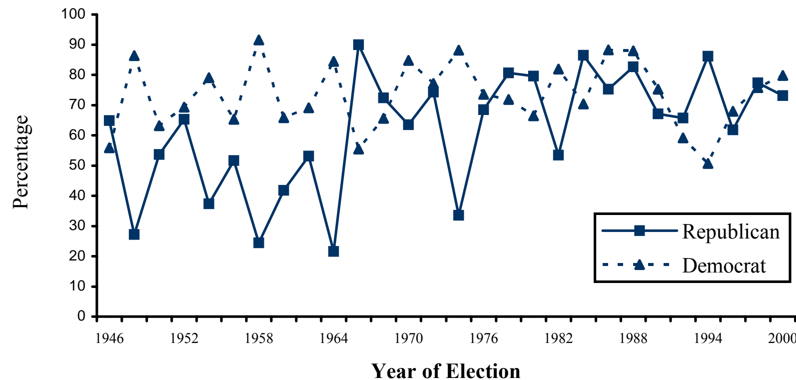
declined (Jacobson 2001, 27). The issue is what this decline reflects. Again, the meaning of the change is not so clear. It has been widely interpreted as reflecting the ability of members to push the vote away from 50 percent as they seek to increase their electoral security. This trend and the specific increase in "safe" seats in 1966, however, might also be seen as reflecting a shift in partisan fortunes.

If incumbents were improving their situation, it should have affected all incumbents. Figure 1 presents the percentage of incumbents who received more than 60 percent of the vote, but by party. The 1966 increase in safe seats and subsequent shift in the overall distribution reflected a change in Republican electoral fortunes. From 1946 through 1964 Republican incumbents on average had fewer safe seats than Democrats. On average 43.6 percent of Republican incumbent seats were safe, while 72.5 percent of Democratic incumbent seats were safe. In 1966 the percentage of safe Republican incumbent seats increased to 89, and averaged 71.3 for the period of 1966 through 2000. Democratic members experienced little change in the percentage of seats with 60 percent or more, averaging 72.5 for 1946-1964 and 73.2 for 1966-2000. Republican incumbents averaged 60.3 percent of the vote from 1946-1964 and 67.1 for 1966-2000. Democrats, in contrast, declined from 75.2 to 71.1 percent of the vote. It cannot be an incumbency effect if it happens to incumbents of only one party.

There is not space here to discuss the intricacies of long-term partisan shifts, but there clearly was an improvement in Republican fortunes in 1966, leading eventually to a more bimodal distribution of election outcomes, foreshadowing our current polarization (Jacobson 2003). Before assuming that change is due to the actions of incumbents, it might be valuable to try to understand in what kinds of districts Republicans are doing better and why that is occurring (Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003). If, for example, Republicans are doing better in primarily white districts, more safe seats could reflect realignment and not the presence of incumbents. The role of constituencies deserves to at least be considered as an alternative explanation.

The Incumbency Advantage: The other supporting fact is the increase in the incumbency advantage since the 1960s (Jacobson 2001, 26). Two comments are appropriate. First, the relevance of this to the vote proportion of incumbents in any given year and over time is not clear. It is not surprising that incumbents gradually increase their vote proportion over their career, and that this does not transfer to the next candidate from their party. Assume incumbent proportions increase one percentage point with each year in Congress. Then the crucial matter is how many legislators stay 10 versus 20 years. If all legislators stay 10 years, then the incumbency advantage (using the retirement slump approach) is 10, but the overall vote proportion will not

Figure 1. Percentage of Republican and Democratic Incumbents with 60 Percent or More



change as older legislators with a 10 point advantage are consistently replaced by younger legislators with no advantage. If, however, legislators begin to stay in office longer, raising the average length of stay (Polsby 1968), then the retirement slump will increase and the incumbency advantage will appear to increase. I am uneasy about accepting a statistic that does not somehow separate a "length of stay" effect from an "incumbency" effect.

Second, the increase and leveling off of the incumbency advantage appear to coincide with the change in several indicators that suggest partisanship is increasing. During the 1960s and 1970s there were increases in split-ticket voting, split-outcomes for House and presidential candidates within House districts, and a decline in the correlation of presidential and House results across House districts. The intriguing matter is that all these indicators began to reverse at about the same time (late 1980s) when the incumbency advantage declined (Jacobson 2001, 26). There is the disturbing possibility that all these changes reflect some broad partisan shifts occurring and not an increasing incumbency effect. In short, there is a possibility of uncritical acceptance of a flawed indicator, and little consideration of alternative explanations.

Regarding Mayhew's quote, I stand corrected. The quote on page 27 is: "No theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far." While he does not use the word elections in this line, the thrust of his book certainly conveys his sense that parties are of limited relevance for understanding elections.

Again, the point of presenting these results is to suggest the need for reconsidering the conventional wisdom that incumbents are able to use various resources to increase their vote proportions. While it may appear obvious that vote proportions increased, marginal seats declined, and the incumbency advantage increased, and that all reflect something that incumbents are doing, it is not that clear to me.

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