

The Electoral Vulnerability of
Congressional Incumbents:
Another Perspective

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The invulnerability of congressional incumbents to electoral defeat has been overstated. Ever since the first studies provided evidence for what congressmen and political observers long knew, that incumbents are difficult to unseat, researchers have repeatedly demonstrated the electoral advantages of congressmen over their opponents (Erikson, 1971; Cover, 1977; Hinckley, 1981). Erikson estimated an incumbent's advantage to be about five percent in the post-1966 era (Erikson, 1972), and Cover reported values for the "sophomore surge" in the same range from the 1960 through the 1974 congressional elections (Cover, 1977). The electoral edge may be growing: separately, Mayhew and Born argued that incumbents are safer now than in the past (Mayhew, 1974a; Born, 1979).

The contrast of this uncontradicted body of research with the perceptions and behavior of congressmen seeking reelection is astounding. Representatives act as if they were vulnerable to electoral defeat when conclusions drawn from political science research indicate that they should feel quite secure. Fenno was one of the first to point out the discrepancy, although he was somewhat skeptical of the accuracy of incumbents' views: "House members see electoral uncertainty where outsiders would fail to unearth a single objective indicator of it" (Fenno, 1978, pp. 10-11). Mann suggests, by his choice of title, *Unsafe at Any Margin*, that congressmen usually feel insecure about reelection (Mann, 1978).

We may wish to conclude that incumbents are fools, that it is irrational for them to spend so much energy and so many resources fighting for reelections that seem assured. Or we can consider the possibility that the conclusions we have drawn from our research are mistaken. I opt for the latter course. I shall show in this research note that congressional incumbents are not invulnerable to

electoral defeat, and do so without calling into question the validity of previous research on the electoral advantage of sitting House members.¹

Congressional Elections vs. Congressional Careers

What we know about the electoral success of incumbents comes mainly from taking election results and voter surveys dealing with one election at a time. It is true that ninety percent of congressional incumbents seeking reelection win. It is true that an incumbent candidate will win five percent more votes on average than does a non-incumbent fighting for an open seat. We may fairly conclude that, in any specific election, congressional incumbents are almost immune to electoral defeat. We cannot conclude, however, that incumbents are invulnerable, that, having once won a seat in the House, they are assured of being reelected as long as they wish.

The crucial distinction is between a congressional career and a congressional election. A career can only be built on a series of successfully contested congressional elections. Mayhew said:

It seems fair to characterize the modern Congress as an assembly of professional politicians spinning out political careers. The jobs offer good pay and high prestige. There is no want of applicants for them. Successful pursuit of a career requires continual reelection. (Mayhew, 1974b, pp. 14-15)

Although a congressional career can only be sustained by "continual reelection," it can be broken by one electoral defeat. Previous research and commentary has neglected the career dimension that incumbents are concerned about; we have not examined series of elections. The rise of careerism in the House suggests that congressional invulnerability should be examined in a long-term perspective, rather than in the short-term view focusing on the upcoming election. Incumbents are most likely to win their next reelection fight. Whether they are likely to win all their reelection attempts is a completely different question.

¹The double negative is intentional; I am not suggesting that incumbents are generally vulnerable.

A Longitudinal Perspective

Instead of looking at incumbent margins over challengers or at the differences in margins between challengers opposing incumbents and candidates for open seats, a career perspective forces us to examine series of elections. Whether a representative can forge a congressional career for himself depends in part on his preferences (does he want to stay in the House?) and in part on his electoral strength (can he be reelected?). Clearly, incumbents running for reelection want to stay in the House for the succeeding session at least; the immediate reelection then depends on his electoral strength, which encompasses such factors as name recognition, level of media exposure, access to campaign funds, availability of the perquisites of office, and standing among voters, all factors which benefit incumbents over challengers.

The probability an incumbent will be reelected two times in a row is equal to the product of his reelection chances in his first and second attempts. (Obviously, only successful incumbents in the first attempt are around to contest the next election.) More generally, the probability that a representative will be reelected n times is the product of the probabilities of his being reelected at $t_1, t_2, t_3 \dots t_{n-1}$, and t_n elections. Expressing the relationship in equation form:

$$P_{ri} = \prod_{k=1}^n p_k \quad (1)$$

where P_{ri} represents the probability of continued reelection for an incumbent. Conversely, the probability of an incumbent being defeated before he is reelected n times is $1 - P_{ri}$. To determine the value of P_{ri} , we must evaluate p_k , the probability of an incumbent's reelection in election k .

Because prediction is as difficult in political science as it is in other areas of life, and because my purpose here is to demonstrate that congressional incumbents in fact have not been invulnerable to defeat, I have chosen to define p_k as the actual reelection rate for incumbents in previous elections. It may be argued that this definition forces us to treat all incumbents equally in their probability of reelection. Are not some incumbents stronger than others? What about differences between presidential and non-presidential years? Doesn't added seniority increase an incumbent's advantage?

For the purposes of this analysis, I have chosen to treat these factors as if they were held constant. A congressman looking to the future has no reason to assume that in the next five or six elections, for instance, he is more or less likely to be hurt by short-term partisan forces, by changes in levels of turnout, or by unfavorable

issues than any other congressman. He has no reason to assume that he is more likely to be hurt by changing district demographics, nor that he is more likely to face a well-financed and capable challenger than his colleagues will. *For any one election*, these conditions will not hold. But for a series of elections in the future, the only constant factor is the incumbency status of the congressman. And congressmen will not differ in that regard.

Results

Clearly, the probability of an incumbent being reelected at the next election, and the next election *only* (when $k = 1$), is high, indeed. This probability reflects the incumbent electoral advantage other researchers have established. When $k > 1$, however, the probability of continued reelection decreases.

Data for reelection rates of incumbents in the general election for the years 1964 through 1982 were compiled and are reported in Table 1. The figures represent the values for P_{r_i} given k reelections and a specific starting election. For instance, a congressman elected or reelected in 1968 is likely to be reelected, should he choose to run, through 1980 with a probability of .709, and a congressman first elected in 1962 stands about an even chance of losing a reelection bid

Table 1. Probability of Continued Reelection of Congressional Incumbents (General Election).

	Incumbent First Elected in									
	1962	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980
1964	.884									
1966	.794	.898								
1968	.776	.878	.978							
1970	.752	.851	.948	.969						
1972	.727	.822	.915	.936	.966					
1974	.651	.737	.820	.839	.866	.896				
1976	.629	.712	.792	.810	.836	.866	.966			
1978	.598	.676	.753	.770	.794	.822	.918	.950		
1980	.550	.623	.693	.709	.732	.757	.845	.875	.921	
1982	.509	.575	.641	.655	.676	.700	.781	.808	.851	.924

Source: Computed from election results in yearly editions of *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*.

sometime by 1982. The probabilities of reelection are still relatively high, but they are not nearly so high as discussions of incumbency advantages would lead us to believe.

The probabilities of reelection are in fact not so great as these figures suggest. The data are based on general election success rates alone, but a number of incumbents succumb to primary election challengers. We can redefine p_i as the success rate for incumbents in both primary and general elections and recompute values for P_{ri} , reported in Table 2. The values are not much lower, an average of P_{ri} .016, but the decrease is enough to reduce P_{ri} substantially. Taking the probability of primary loss into account increases the likelihood of incumbents losing their seats by about eight percent over a period of six to ten elections. And of course the incumbency advantage for the party holding the seat disappears in the general election if the congressman loses his renomination bid.

This analysis is based on electoral vulnerability demonstrated at the polls, but the vulnerability of some incumbents may never show up in an election because they choose not to run. Jacobson and Kernell label decisions not to run in the face of electoral defeat "strategic retirements" (Jacobson and Kernell, 1981). Clearly, these estimates of reelection probabilities are higher than they should be, because they do not reflect decisions not to seek reelection in the face of adverse electoral circumstances. Unfortunately, reliable data on the

Table 2. Probability of Continued Reelection of Congressional Incumbents (Primary and General Elections).

	Incumbent First Elected in									
	1962	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980
1964	.866									
1966	.763	.881								
1968	.739	.853	.968							
1970	.698	.806	.915	.945						
1972	.653	.754	.856	.885	.936					
1974	.573	.662	.751	.776	.821	.877				
1976	.549	.634	.719	.743	.786	.840	.958			
1978	.514	.594	.674	.696	.737	.787	.898	.937		
1980	.466	.539	.611	.632	.668	.714	.814	.850	.907	
1982	.427	.493	.559	.578	.612	.653	.745	.778	.830	.915

Source: Computed from election results in yearly editions of *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*.

number of strategic retirements are not available, making it impossible to recompute P_{ri} to take such withdrawals into account. But the impact of strategic retirements could only lower P_{ri} .

Conclusion

Congressional incumbents are formidable electoral opponents, as reflected both by the rate at which they successfully win reelection and by the margins with which they win. To have established the fact of that electoral advantage and to go on to studies which try to account for that edge is to make substantial progress in the study of congressional elections. However, both the activities of incumbents and the never-ending stream of challengers for their seats indicate that the electoral advantage enjoyed by incumbents may be exaggerated.

The data presented here argue clearly that, at least during the 1964-1982 period, incumbent success rates are not equivalent to incumbent invulnerability. Incumbents are quite likely to face defeat over the course of a congressional career. Even though the results of studies of congressional elections are correct about the value of incumbency in a single election, one cannot generalize too broadly and suggest that it bestows electoral security to incumbents.

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