

It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in US House Elections

Gary C. Jacobson, University of California, San Diego

With little fanfare, the electoral advantage enjoyed by US representatives has fallen over the past several elections to levels not seen since the 1950s. The incumbency advantage has diminished in conjunction with an increase in party loyalty, straight-ticket voting, and president-centered electoral nationalization, products of the widening and increasingly coherent partisan divisions in the American electorate. Consequently, House incumbents now have a much harder time retaining districts that lean toward the rival party. Democrats had been the main beneficiaries of the denationalization of electoral politics that had enabled the incumbency advantage to grow, and they have thus been the main victims of the reemergence of a more party-centered electoral process. Republicans enjoy a long-standing structural advantage in the distribution of partisans across districts, so this trend has strengthened their grip on the House even as they have become less competitive in contests for the presidency.

The sharp increase in the incumbency advantage in US House elections observed during the 1960s inspired a research agenda that produced two classic studies (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974a), a number of other important books (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Cox and Katz 2002; Fiorina 1989), and more than 100 articles describing and aiming to explain the phenomenon.¹ It is thus of no small interest that over the past decade the incumbency advantage in House elections has fallen to near pre-1960s levels and has diminished noticeably in Senate elections as well. This development is of course substantively important for our understanding of contemporary electoral and congressional politics (Jacobson 2015), but it also casts light on the sources of the earlier rise in the electoral value of incumbency. From the beginning, it was evident that the enhanced incumbency advantage was intimately linked to—indeed conditional on—two coincident electoral developments: diminishing levels of partisanship and party loyalty in the electorate and a decoupling of congressional from presidential elections as part of a broader denationalization of electoral politics. Both trends

contributed to the emergence of a more candidate-centered electoral process in which incumbents flourished (Born 2000; Ferejohn 1977; Ferejohn and Calvert 1984; Kritzer and Eubank 1979; Nelson 1978/79; Romero and Sanders 1994). Over the last three decades, however, party loyalty has risen steadily, the articulation between congressional and presidential elections has strengthened, and electoral politics have grown increasingly nationalized. As a consequence, House incumbency status has lost a considerable portion of its electoral value.

In this article, I present a variety of aggregate and survey data that document the shrinking electoral impact and value of congressional incumbency and connect this development to the growing nationalization of congressional election politics, with presidents and presidential candidates as the principal focal objects. The data tell a simple story: The incumbency advantage rose in parallel with a steady decline in party loyalty and rise in ticket splitting from the 1950s through the early 1980s; since then, it has fallen in near lockstep with a rise in party loyalty and straight-ticket voting, a conse-

Gary C. Jacobson (gjacobson@ucsd.edu) is the Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego. He specializes in the study of US elections, parties, interest groups, public opinion, and Congress.

Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the paper are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix containing supplemental analyses is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/681670>.

1. See the footnotes in Jacobson (2013d, 29–50) for a broad sampling of this literature.

The Journal of Politics, volume 77, number 3. Published online April 23, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/681670>
© 2015 by the Southern Political Science Association. All rights reserved. 0022-3816/2015/7703-0020\$10.00

861

quence of the widening and increasingly coherent partisan divisions in the American electorate. As a result, members of Congress now have a much harder time holding on to states and districts with constituencies that lean toward the rival party. Because congressional Democrats had been the main beneficiaries of the decoupling of congressional from presidential elections, they have also been the main victims of the increased partisan articulation of elections across federal offices. And because Republicans enjoy a long-standing structural advantage in the distribution of partisans across districts, the emergence of a much more party-centered electoral process has given them a firm grip on the House even as they have become less competitive in contests for the presidency.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

The electoral advantages conferred by incumbency are conventionally gauged by how much better candidates do running as incumbents than they would as nonincumbents. This difference has been measured in several ways. Initially, the value of incumbency was estimated from the *sophomore surge*, the average gain in vote share won by candidates running as incumbents for the first time compared to their vote share in their initial election, adjusted for the national partisan swing (Alford and Brady 1988; Alford and Hibbing 1981; Cover 1977; Erikson 1972); the *retirement slump*, the average drop in the party's vote from the previous election when the incumbent departs, again adjusted for the swing (Cover and Mayhew 1981); or an average of the two—the *surge* (Brady, Gaines, and Rivers 1994). Gelman and King (1990) developed a more sophisticated procedure designed to eliminate selection bias and other sources of error in surge and its components. They estimate the incumbency advantage by regressing the Democrat's share of the vote on the Democrat's vote in the previous election, a dummy variable for the party holding the seat, and incumbency, which takes the value of one if the Democrat is the incumbent, negative one if the Republican is the incumbent, and zero if the seat is open. The coefficient on incumbency estimates the value (in percentage of votes) of incumbency status for each election year.

A drawback to the Gelman-King approach (which also applies to the surge and its components) is that it requires interelection comparisons between stable districts and therefore cannot be used for the years ending in "2" (following reapportionment and redistricting). For this analysis, I thus estimate an alternative version of the Gelman-King index by replacing the lagged Democratic vote with the Democratic

presidential candidate's share of the major party vote in the district in the current or, for midterms, previous election, avoiding this problem and allowing 2012 and other post-reapportionment years to be included in the analysis.² The coefficient on the incumbency variable under this modification is derived from a comparison of how incumbents fare compared to candidates for open seats, given the district's partisan composition (measured by the presidential vote) and previous party occupancy. As figure 1 shows, all three measures—the surge, the Gelman-King index, and my modified version of the index—tell the same story: The vote value of House incumbency rose steeply from the 1950s through the 1980s and has since trended erratically downward, ending up in 2012 and 2014 at its lowest levels in four decades.³ In 2014, House incumbency, according to these measures, was worth only 3.0–3.7 percentage points.

The rise and subsequent decline in the congressional incumbency advantage paralleled changes in the incidence of party-line voting. From 1956 through 1980, party loyalty in House elections contested by both major parties, as measured by the American National Election Studies (ANES), fell by 16 percentage points (fig. 2);⁴ since then it has trended upward and in 2012 matched the series high point of 90% last reached in 1956. This pattern is not confined to House elections but is a manifestation of national trends equally evident in party-line voting for senator and president, both of which also reached high points in 2012. Challengers' partisans have always been more inclined to defect to incumbents than have incumbents' partisans to challengers (or candidates for open seats), but the incidence of such defections rose in the 1960s and 1970s to remarkably high levels (fig. 3). These estimates were exaggerated by changes in the wording of the vote choice question beginning in 1978 (Box-Steffensmeier, Jacobson, and Grant 2000; Eubank 1985), but even with that caveat, it is clear that the decline in party loyalty strongly favored incumbents, contributing to their growing electoral advantage. It is equally clear that the revival of party loyalty in recent elections has diminished reported partisan defections to incumbents, which in the 2008

2. I also replace their dichotomous measure of party currently holding the seat with a trichotomous measure that takes the value of one if the seat was currently held by a Democrat, negative one if it was held by a Republican, and zero if it is a new seat created by redistricting that is held by neither party.

3. The two variants of the Gelman-King measure are correlated at .88.

4. The ANES 2010 Time Series Cumulative Data File and 2012 Time Series Study are both available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>.

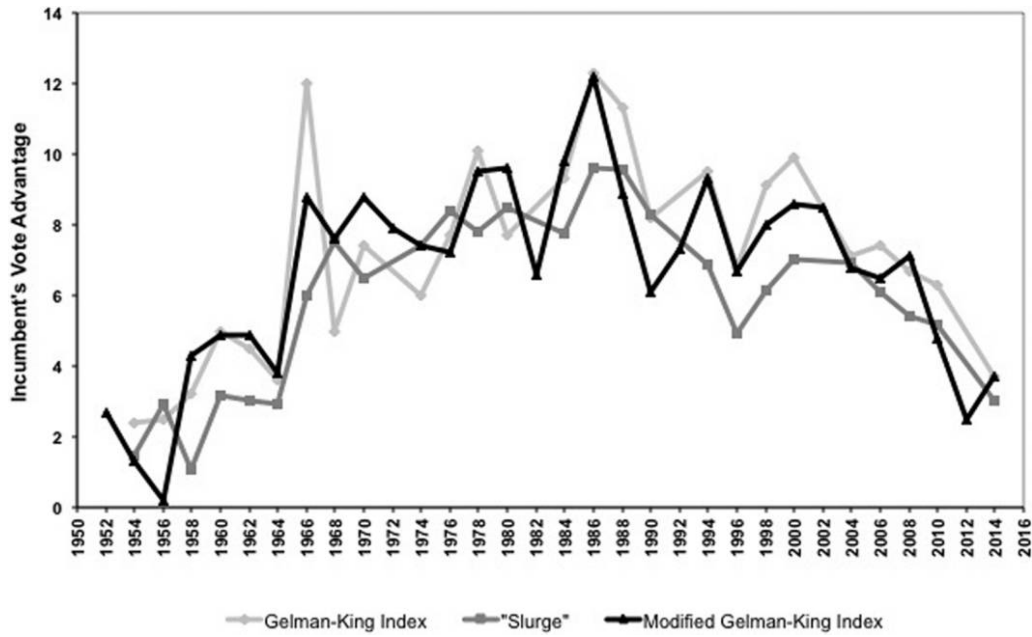


Figure 1. Three measures of the incumbency advantage, 1952–2014

and 2012 ANESs were at lower levels than in any election since 1960.

THE GROWING NATIONALIZATION OF HOUSE ELECTIONS

The changing effects of partisanship are also manifest in the incidence of ticket splitting over this period (gray column in fig. 4). The proportion of citizens who voted for presidential

and House candidates of opposite parties more than doubled between the 1950s and 1970s but has since declined to the extent that in 2012 it was the smallest for any election in the entire series. Again, these trends have had a disproportionate impact on voting for incumbents. The black column in figure 4 displays the proportion of voters who stuck with their party’s presidential candidate but defected to an incumbent of the rival party in these elections. Only

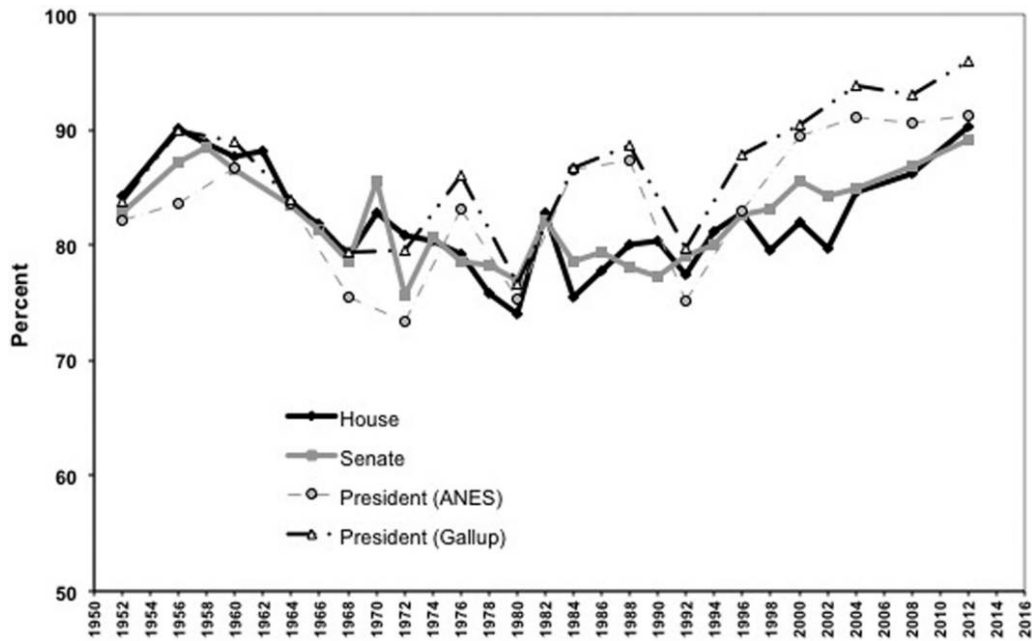


Figure 2. Party loyalty in national elections, 1952–2012. Source: American National Election Studies and Gallup Surveys

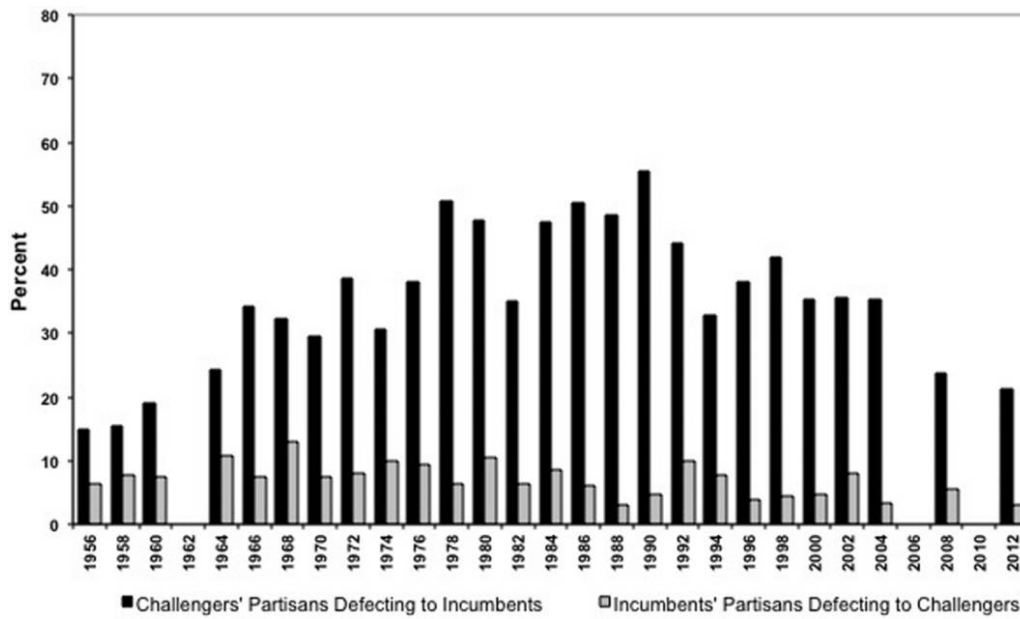


Figure 3. Partisan voters defecting to incumbents and challengers in contested House elections, 1956–2012. Source: American National Election Studies; entry for 2012 is based on the face-to-face portion of the survey.

about 5% did so in 1956. From 1972 through 1992 the defection rate consistently exceeded 14% and occasionally 20%, but in the past decade it has fallen steeply, reaching a low of 6% in 2012.

The growing nationalization of House voting focused on the presidency in recent decades is confirmed by other survey data. Voters' choice of House candidates has become increasingly congruent with opinions of the president's job

performance (congruence is defined as approvers voting for the president's party's candidate and disapprovers voting for the rival party's candidate). Figure 5 displays the trends in congruence for midterm election years and for presidential election years when a sitting president sought reelection. The data presented are for voters in incumbent-held districts, but the patterns are virtually identical if voters in all contested elections are included. Back in the

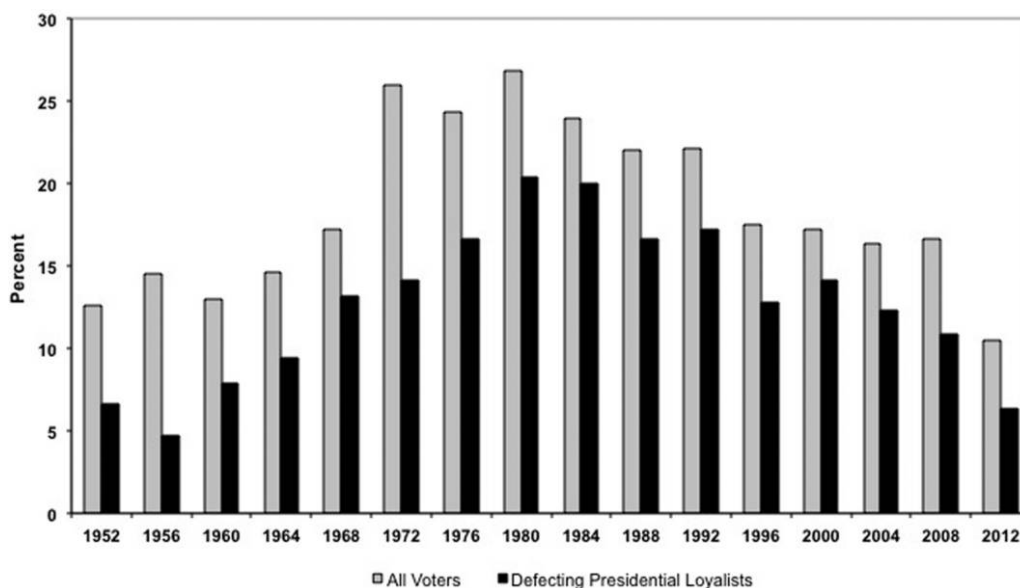


Figure 4. Ticket splitting in presidential and US House elections, 1952–2012. Source: American National Election Studies; entry for 2012 is based on the face-to-face component.

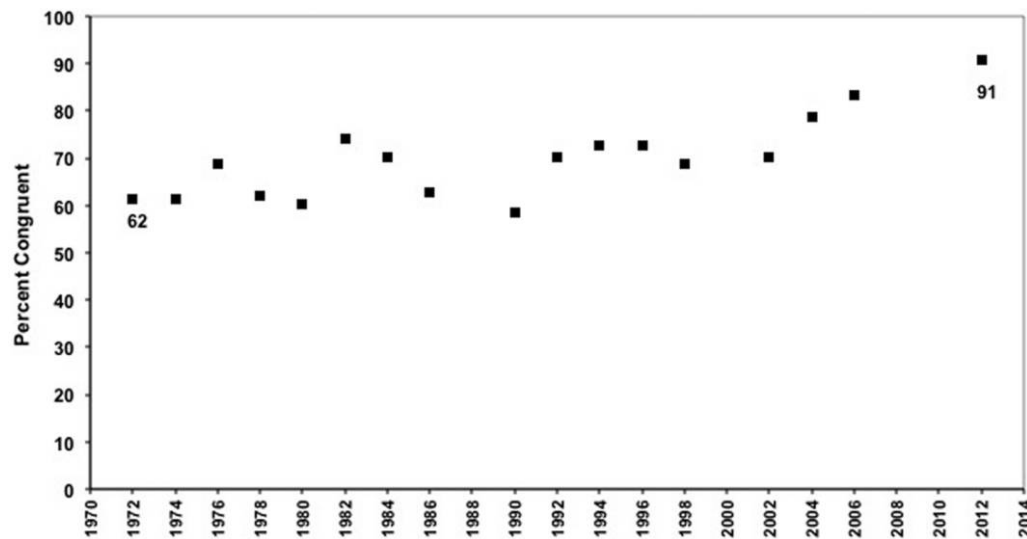


Figure 5. Congruence of presidential approval and the vote for House incumbents, 1972–2012. Source: American National Election Studies; entry for 2012 is based on the face-to-face portion of the survey.

1970s, fewer than two-thirds of House votes matched presidential approval or disapproval. By 2012 congruence had reached 91%.

Aggregate as well as individual survey data document substantial strengthening of the link between presidential and congressional elections in recent years. Figure 6 displays the percentage of variance shared by presidential and House vote percentages at the district level in all contests and, separately, those involving incumbents since 1952.⁵ It reveals the progressive dissociation of election results across these offices from the 1950s through the 1980s and their growing articulation since then, culminating in an all-time high in shared variance of more than 90% in 2012.

The evidence here, then, is that House incumbency advantage initially grew as partisan loyalties atrophied and has subsequently declined as partisans have grown increasingly reluctant to cross party lines or split their tickets when casting House ballots. Brady, D’Onofrio, and Fiorina (2000) concluded their analysis of the growing nationalization of electoral politics by asking, “Have elections become nationalized because incumbency has become less valuable as a voting cue, or has incumbency weakened as a voting cue because elections have become more nationalized?” (144). In light of increasingly nationalized, party-line voting across all federal offices, the latter seems to be the case. The evidence is also compatible with Stonecash’s (2012, 179) novel argument that the incumbency advantage initially grew because

5. Shared variance is 100 times the square of the correlation coefficient between the district-level presidential and House major party vote shares.

“incumbents were providing a strong buffer against partisan trends” that realigned partisan presidential voting from the 1960s onward as voters responded to new strategies of presidential coalition building. District-level party coalitions lagged behind in this realignment process, but as the incumbents relying on them were gradually replaced, these local coalitions gradually evolved into something like their national counterparts, leaving the independent effects of incumbency greatly diminished.

Partisan realignment was most pronounced in the South, raising the question of whether the trends examined in this article varied significantly by region. An online appendix to this article includes charts documenting the key trends within and outside the South. The patterns indicate that although the South contributed disproportionately to several initial trends in these data, all of them are strongly evident in nonsouthern states as well, and regional differences have virtually disappeared over the past two decades—another sign of the nationalization of electoral politics.

CONSEQUENCES FOR PARTISAN ELECTORAL COHERENCE

An important consequence as well as manifestation of the declining incumbency advantage is a steep decline in the incidence of split outcomes: local pluralities for the presidential and House candidates of different major parties. The trends in the percentage of split outcomes are displayed in figure 7, which also shows that a large majority of these splits have involved incumbents. Split results are of course more common in years with landslide presidential elections—note 1972 and 1984—but 2004 and especially 2012 produced far

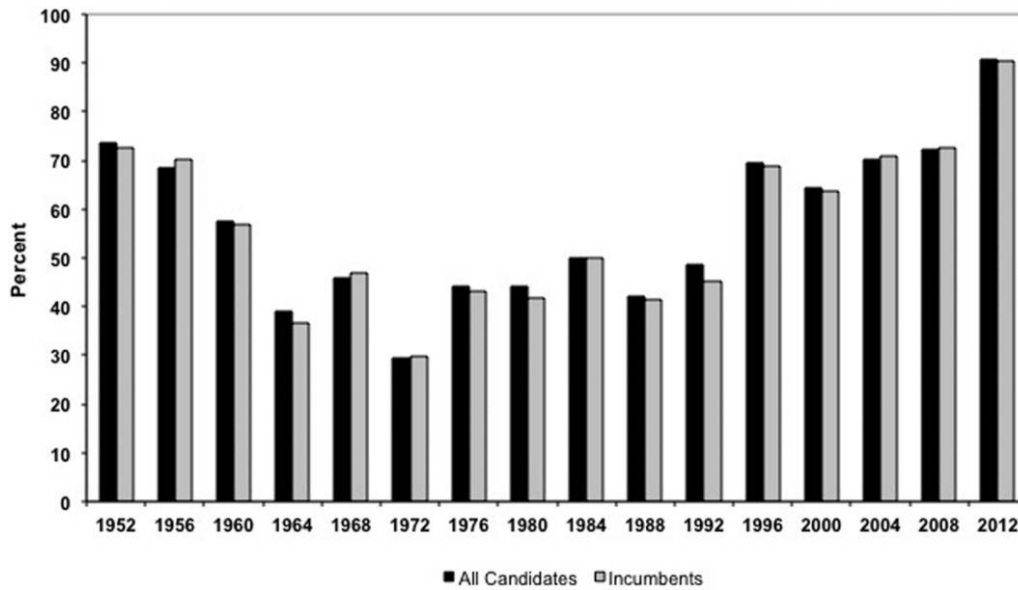


Figure 6. Shared variance between district-level votes for president and US House candidates, 1952-2012. Source: Compiled by author

fewer split results than comparably close elections such as 1960, 1968, or 1976. It has obviously become much more difficult for House incumbents to retain districts won by the other party's presidential candidate.

A more refined view of changes in an incumbent's ability to win constituencies in which his or her party is at a disadvantage emerges when the local presidential vote is adjusted for variations in the national vote across election years. For figure 8 and elsewhere in this article, I define Democratic (Republican-) leaning districts as those in which the Democratic (Republican) presidential candidate's share of major

party votes was more than 2 percentage points above its national vote in the specified election year or, for midterms, in the election two years earlier. The figure displays the number of Democratic and Republican incumbents who won in districts that, by this definition, leaned toward the rival party in each election year. That number dropped sharply in the 1990s and again after 2008; in 2014, only five incumbents, two Democrats and three Republicans, won such districts.

Figure 8 also reveals that incumbent Democrats have been the big losers from this change. In every election from

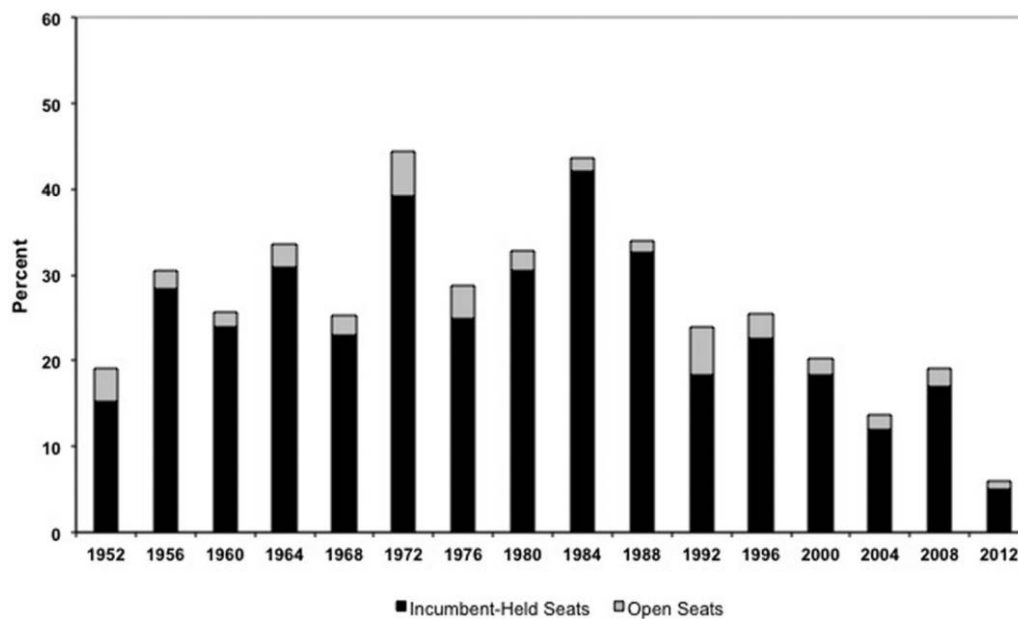


Figure 7. Split results in presidential and House elections, 1952-2012. Source: Compiled by author

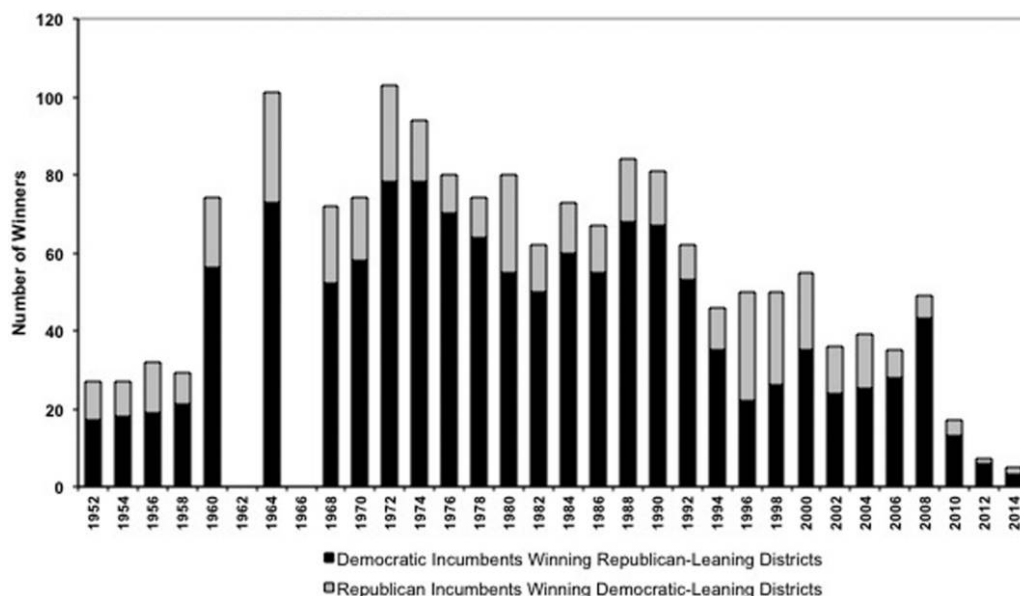


Figure 8. US House incumbents winning against the partisan grain, 1952–2014. Leaning districts are those in which the president’s vote share was 2 or more percentage points more Republican or Democratic than his national average in the current or, for midterms, previous election. Data for 1962 and 1966 are too incomplete for analysis. Source: Compiled by author.

1960 through 1992, they had been able to win more than 50 districts against the partisan grain, with a high of 78 (1972 and 1974). These victories were critical to their retention of majority status over this period, which ended in 1994 when Republicans picked up 16 of the 51 Republican-leaning districts that Democrats had won in 1992. Republican incumbents have never won more than 28 Democratic-leaning

districts, so the diminishing ability of House incumbents to retain uncongenial territory has hurt them much less. I will have more to say about the implications of this development later.

The greater difficulty now faced by incumbents trying to win reelection in districts where the partisan balance favors the rival party is underlined by the data in figure 9, which

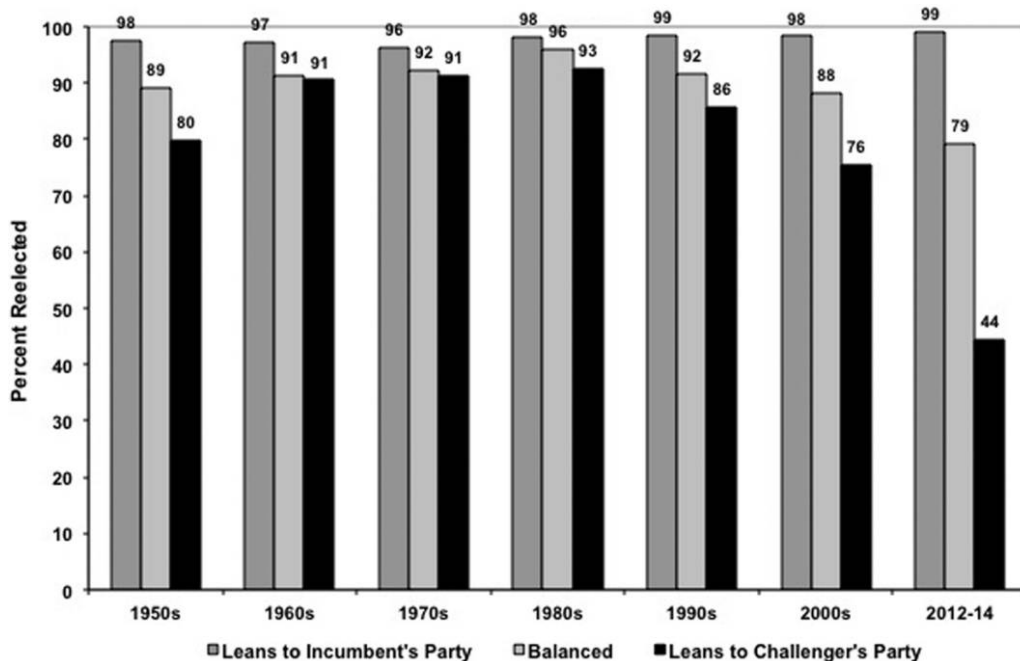


Figure 9. District partisanship and House incumbent reelection rates by decade. Source: Compiled by author

shows how incumbent success rates have varied with local partisan conditions across the last six decades.⁶ Incumbents have always been highly successful in retaining districts that lean toward their party. Their success in balanced districts—those in which the presidential vote in the current (or for midterms, prior) election was within 2 percentage points of the national vote—was a couple of points higher in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s than in earlier decades but has fallen to 79% in the two most recent elections. The most striking changes occurred among incumbents pursuing reelection in districts leaning toward the challenger's party. They were increasingly successful through the 1980s, but their success rate was lower (at 76%) in the 2000s than in any previous decade, and for the first two elections of the current decade, it was below 50%.

The diminishing electoral impact of House incumbency is illustrated in yet another way by the fates of House members swept into office by strong national tides who took seats from the rival party in districts favoring that party. In this category were 29 Democrats elected in 1974, 17 Republicans elected in 1994, 29 Democrats elected in 2006, and another 17 elected in 2008. Figure 10 displays their attrition rates over the next three elections (two elections in the case of the 2008 Democrats). More than 80% of the Democrats elected in 1974 were still in office after the 1978 election and nearly two-thirds remained after 1980, a year in which Republicans won the Senate and White House. The attrition rate of the 1994 Republicans was considerably higher, in part because several left to seek higher office, but mainly because they lost reelection bids more frequently. The Democrats elected in 2006 were very successful in 2008, also a year in which their party had a strong wind at its back. But they lost in droves in 2010 when their party took a "shellacking" (Obama's words), as did the Democrats who had defeated Republicans on Republican turf in 2008. Of this latter group, all 16 who sought reelection in 2010 lost. After the 2012 election, only three of the 38 Democrats first elected in 2006 and 2008 to Republican-leaning seats remained in the House. The difference in attrition rates stands as a stark illustration of the diminishing electoral potency of House incumbency over these decades.⁷

6. Decades are defined by reapportionment cycles; e.g., the 1960s cover 1962–70.

7. These differences are not simply the consequence of variations in the magnitude of vote swings following the initial wave election. The Democratic share of the national House vote fell 7.3 percentage points between 1974 and 1980; it fell a comparable 7.5 points between 2006 and 2010. The Republican share of the national vote fell by only 3.4 points between 1994 and 2000.

The data presented here leave little room for doubt that the growth in party loyalty and straight-ticket voting over the past two decades has reduced the House incumbency advantage to pre-1960 levels. These trends have also diminished the electoral impact of challenger quality, for experienced challengers, too, benefit less from their résumés and higher name recognition in the more party-centered electoral process that has emerged in recent years (Jacobson 2013c). Growing partisan electoral coherence is the product of the long-term realignment and sorting of voters that has left the mass parties increasingly homogeneous internally and divided from one another on issues, ideology, and even perceptions of and beliefs about reality (Abramowitz 2010; Jacobson 2012, 2013b, 2013e; Levendusky 2009; Stonecash 2012). The two most recent presidencies have also been the most divisive on record, with consequences clearly registered in congressional as well as in presidential elections (Jacobson 2013a).

In this polarized environment, incumbent members of Congress have lost some of the regard, as well as the votes, that they once received across party lines. Approval of their job performance among voters identifying with the rival party in 2012 was 30 percentage points below its peak in 1988 (fig. 11); their average rating of the incumbent on the ANES thermometer scale was down to 45 degrees, 14 degrees below its peak. Voters' ratings of their own party's incumbents have, in contrast, fallen only modestly by either measure (7 points and 3 degrees, respectively, from their highest levels).

DISCUSSION

The results reported here cast considerable light on the question of why the vote value of incumbency increased in the first place. They suggest that, of the various explanations offered in the literature for the rise in the incumbency advantage during the 1960s, the weakening of party loyalties was primary and the other explanations, such as expanded resources and opportunities for reaching and serving constituents (Fiorina 1977, 1981, 1989; Mayhew 1974a, 1974b), the spread of local television news (Prior 2006), a greater incumbent campaign spending advantage (Abramowitz 1991; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006), and redistricting (Cox and Katz 1996, 2002), are derivative. These other developments may have contributed to congressional incumbents' enhanced ability to win votes, but they did so mainly by enabling members to exploit the opportunities opened up by the atrophy of partisan ties and the decoupling of local from national voting more effectively; they remain largely in place, but the incumbency advantage

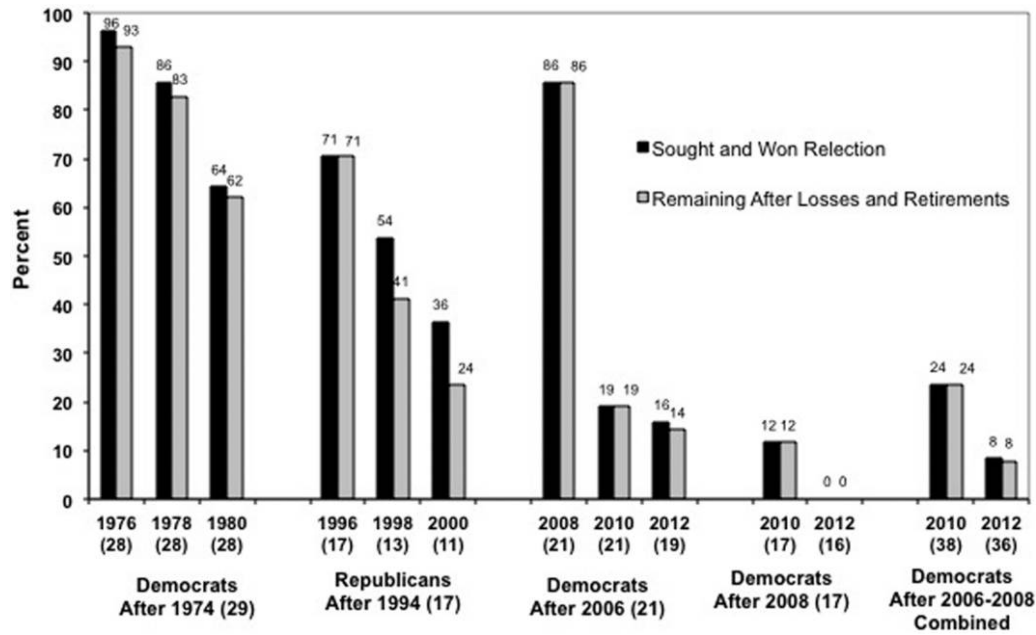


Figure 10. Attrition of representatives winning unfriendly territory in large swing elections. The number of members that form the denominator is in parentheses. Source: Compiled by author.

has nonetheless diminished. Members had the motive and supplied themselves with the means to cultivate an expanded personal vote during the 1960s, but changes in the behavior of the electorate were necessary to give them the opportunity. They retain the motive, and the means are, if anything, more abundant than ever.⁸ What has diminished is the opportunity for members to develop, through their own locally focused efforts, a personal relationship with constituents that can insulate them from national partisan forces, because deeper party divisions in the public have substantially reduced the number of voters susceptible to personal cross-party appeals.

Moreover, new institutional players have emerged to exploit and reinforce voters' strengthened partisanship to defeat members whose party affiliation is a local liability. The sums of money available to incumbents seeking reelection have risen steeply, but so, too, has the money available to their challengers, especially in states and districts that are balanced or lean toward the challenger's party (fig. 12). House

8. Incumbents continue to seek reelection as consistently and assiduously as they had in previous decades (Jacobson 2015) and at arguably higher opportunity costs: think of the income they forgo by not moving to K Street. Official resources that can be used to reach and serve constituents remain lavish, and the money available for their campaigns continues to increase far faster than inflation; incumbents' spending has grown by an average of about 10% in real (inflation-adjusted) terms from one election to the next for the past four decades.

incumbents representing districts with a favorable partisan makeup have faced poorly funded challengers all along, with relatively little change since the 1970s. Those competing in balanced districts, in contrast, have faced increasingly well-funded opponents, but the greatest increase has occurred in districts where the challenger enjoys a favorable partisan climate.⁹ The trend over the past decade is particularly striking. It has not generally put incumbents at a financial disadvantage—in the last six elections (2004–14), they have outspent the challenger in 88% of these districts and by an average of more than \$880,000 (i.e., by more than 60%)—but it has made it more difficult for them to prevail. During this period, 31% of them lost compared to 16% in balanced districts and less than 2% in districts favoring the incumbent's party.

The parties have become much better at distributing their resources efficiently, and so nearly every House or Senate challenger with any plausible chance of winning is now adequately funded (Jacobson 2010). In addition, the Hill committees, wealthy individuals, and nonparty interest groups (corporations, unions, super political action com-

9. Defined as before as where the challenger's party's presidential vote was at least 2 points above its national average in the current or, for midterms, most recent prior election year. There were only nine such districts in 2014, so contributors evidently invested more in challengers' campaigns in the 25 balanced districts.

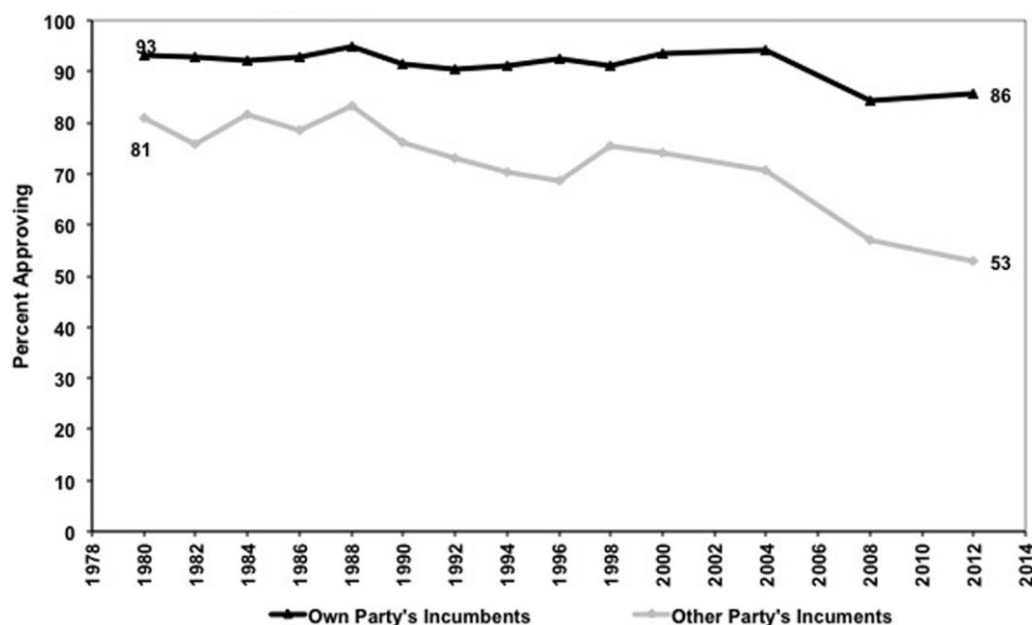


Figure 11. Voters' approval of House incumbent's performance, by party, 1980–2012. Source: American National Election Studies; entry for 2012 is based on the face-to-face portion of the survey.

mittees), all liberated by the Supreme Court to spend unlimited sums on independent campaigns, have also become major sources of assistance to promising challengers.¹⁰ In 2012, for example, independent expenditures by such groups increased the total spent on behalf of House challengers in balanced or challenger-favoring districts by about 50% above the candidate averages shown in figure 12. Independent campaigns help incumbents as well as challengers in these districts and thus do little to reduce the incumbents' typical resource advantage. But campaign spending is more productive for challengers than for incumbents, so the net effect has been to make it harder for incumbents to prevail (Jacobson 2013d, 51–59).

Total independent spending in House races from all sources grew from \$37.9 million in 2004 to \$260.6 million in 2012 and, according to incomplete data, more than \$290 million in 2014.¹¹ The full impact of this astonishing rise in outside spending has yet to be gauged, but it seems clear that independent campaigns on behalf of the oppo-

sition virtually guarantee that any national issue, leader, roll call vote, or any other action potentially damaging to an insecure member is brought to the attention of voters. These campaigns often link candidates to national issues and figures—particularly presidents or presidential candidates—and thus tend to nationalize elections, heighten partisanship, and undermine election strategies based on independence and solicitation of a personal vote. Even supportive independent campaigns may make it harder for members to shape and disseminate the personal campaign messages they think will best resonate locally (Jacobson 2013d, 85). With all the resources available to mobilize against them, incumbents in potentially competitive states or districts can no longer hope to win simply by avoiding well-funded opponents. The “scare-off” effect of incumbency (Cox and Katz 1996), if it ever operated, no longer helps to protect members in such circumstances. These developments cannot, however, explain the overall decline in the incumbency advantage, for it has fallen much more in districts with low-spending challengers, who are virtually never supported by outside groups, than in the kind of districts these groups target (Jacobson 2013c).

THE REPUBLICAN ADVANTAGE

The advent of a more polarized and loyal partisan electorate and the ensuing atrophy of the incumbency advantage have had disparate partisan consequences. In presidential elections, high rates of party-line voting favor Democratic can-

10. The committees are the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Republican National Congressional Committee, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

11. The 2012 data are from the Campaign Finance Institute, available at <http://www.cfinst.org/data.aspx>; the 2014 data are estimated from <http://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/summ.php?cycle=2014&disp=R&pty=A&type=H>.

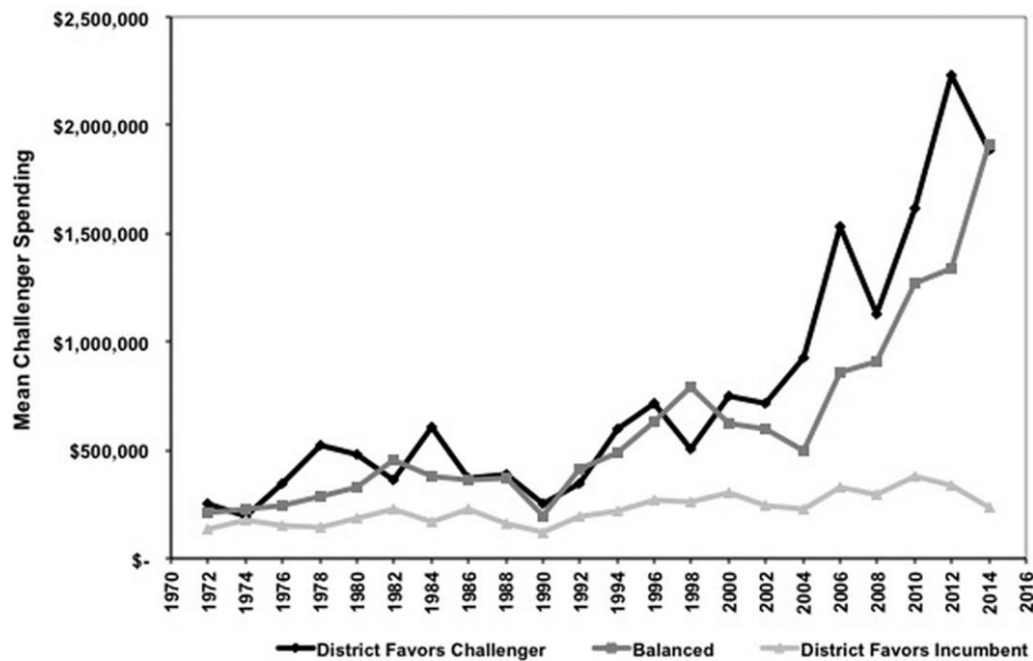


Figure 12. Campaign spending by challengers, by district partisan leanings. Spending is adjusted for inflation, 2014 = 1.00. Source: Compiled by author from Federal Election Commission data.

didates because their party retains an edge among party identifiers and the distribution of partisans across the states also favors them in the Electoral College.¹² The very high levels of party-line voting observed on both sides were thus a net plus for Obama in 2012, and demographic trends suggest that the same will be true for future Democratic presidential candidates.¹³

At the House level, however, party-line voting, electoral coherence, and the shrinking personal vote clearly favor the Republicans, because they enjoy a large structural advantage in the distribution of partisans across districts. Although Republican gerrymanders reinforced this advantage after the 2000 and 2010 censuses, they have existed for

decades as a product of coalition demographics. Democrats win the lion's share of minority, single, young, secular, gay, and highly educated voters who are concentrated in urban districts that deliver lopsided Democratic majorities. Regular Republican voters are spread more evenly across suburbs, smaller cities, and rural areas, so fewer Republican votes are "wasted" in highly skewed districts. Thus although Obama won by nearly 5 million votes in 2012, Romney outpolled Obama in 226 congressional districts, while Obama ran ahead in only 209. This imbalance was as great in the 1970s as it is today (Jacobson 2013b), but with the rise of party-line voting and decline in ticket splitting, it has become much more consequential. Democrats actually won a majority of the major party vote cast nationally for House candidates in 2012, 50.7%; but with party loyalty so high, split outcomes so rare, and the Republican structural advantage so pronounced, they won only 46.2% of House seats. At present, Republicans can win a 226–209 House majority by taking only those districts where Romney ran at least 2 points ahead of his national vote (and hence won the district). Democrats would have to win all of the Democratic-leaning and balanced districts plus eight Republican-leaning districts to reach a majority (218 seats). Under this configuration, Republicans seem virtually certain to retain control of the House for the remainder of the decade.

The incumbency advantage's decline, then, has clearly tilted the field in the Republicans' favor. During the 1970s

12. The Democratic advantage in participating identifiers was estimated to be 6 points in the National Exit Poll, 4.4 points in the face-to-face component of the 2012 ANES, 6.7 points in the full ANES sample, and 9.4 points in the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. According to Gallup's calculation of party affiliation by state from its tracking poll, January–December 2013, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in 24 states (and the District of Columbia) with 313 electoral votes, and Republicans outnumbered Democrats in 26 states with 225 electoral votes; data are available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/167030/not-states-lean-democratic-2013.aspx?ref=more#2>, accessed February 3, 2014.

13. Obama's Democratic coalition included growing segments of the electorate: young people, singles (especially single women), social liberals, the nonchurched, and ethnic minorities; Romney's Republican coalition, in contrast, was overwhelmingly white as well as soldier, married, religiously observant, and socially conservative, all shrinking demographic categories.

and 1980s, incumbency helped keep the House in the Democrats' hands while they were losing five of six presidential elections. The reversion to a more party-centered electoral process, combined with the Republican structural advantage, has since enabled Republicans to win the House in eight of the 10 elections held since 1994 despite losing the popular vote for president in every election during this period except 2004. At one time, the personal vote promoted divided government; now its absence does so.

This analysis has focused on House elections, but similar if somewhat more erratic and less pronounced trends are also evident in US Senate elections over the same period, including a declining incumbency advantage, growing party loyalty, declining ticket splitting, fewer partisan defections to incumbents, greater congruence between presidential evaluations and Senate voting, increasing shared state-level variance between Senate and presidential voting, fewer split results, and a decline in incumbents' ability to win states that lean toward the rival party (Jacobson 2014). After the 2014 elections, only 16 senators served states lost by their party's presidential candidate in the most recent election, the fewest in any Congress during the postwar period.

The findings reported here raise some obvious questions. Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002) have demonstrated that the growth in the incumbency advantage was not confined to members of Congress but also registered across a range of state-level executive and legislative offices. Will increased party cohesion at the national level also reduce the incumbency advantages attached to these lower offices? Much additional work is necessary to address that question adequately, but it is indicative that, according to the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere 2012), party loyalty ranged between 90% and 94% among voters for governor, attorney general, secretary of state, and both chambers of the state legislature, comparable to 93% in the presidential and Senate elections and 91% in US House elections. If greater party loyalty has reduced the value of incumbency in federal elections, it can also be expected to do so at the state level as well.

A second question is how durable the changes observed over the past decade will be. George W. Bush and Barack Obama have been extraordinarily polarizing figures, serving as unrivaled focal points for political conflict during their respective administrations. Obama has been an especially potent galvanizer of intense partisan sentiments (Jacobson 2013e), so it is possible that party divisions will soften somewhat when he is gone from the scene. But the demographic differences in the party coalitions that solidified during Obama's presidency, the huge increase in cam-

paign activity by resolutely partisan and ideological national organizations, and a national agenda filled with deep, unresolved conflicts as a legacy of divided government leave plenty of reason to doubt that Obama's departure will soon reverse any of the trends documented here. House incumbents will continue to win reelection at high rates, but only because an overwhelming majority of them now represent districts where their party is dominant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this work was presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2014.

REFERENCES

- Abramowitz, Alan I. 1991. "Incumbency, Campaign Spending, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 53:34–56.
- Abramowitz, Alan I. 2010. *The Disappearing Center*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Abramowitz, Alan I., Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning. 2006. "Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 68:75–88.
- Alford, John R., and David R. Brady. 1988. "Partisan and Incumbent Advantages in U.S. House Elections, 1846–1990." In Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 141–57.
- Alford, John R., and John R. Hibbing. 1981. "Increased Incumbency Advantage in the House." *Journal of Politics* 43:1042–61.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen. 2012. "CCES Common Content, 2012." Cooperative Congressional Election Study (distributor), version 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/21447>.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, and James M. Snyder. 2002. "The Incumbency Advantage in U.S. Elections: An Analysis of State and Federal Offices." *Election Law Journal* 1:315–38.
- Born, Richard. 2000. "Congressional Incumbency and the Rise of Split Ticket Voting." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25:365–87.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet, Gary C. Jacobson, and Tobin Grant. 2000. "Question Wording and the House Vote: Some Experimental Evidence." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64:257–70.
- Brady, David W., Robert D'Onofrio, and Morris P. Fiorina. 2000. "The Nationalization of Electoral Forces Revisited." In David W. Brady, John F. Cogan, and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Continuity and Change in House Elections*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brady, David W., Brian Gaines, and Douglas Rivers. 1994. "The Incumbency Advantage in the House and Senate: A Comparative Institutional Analysis." Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.
- Cain, Bruce, John Ferejohn, and Morris P. Fiorina. 1987. *The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cover, Albert D. 1977. "One Good Term Deserves Another: The Advantage of Incumbency in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 21:523–41.
- Cover, Albert D., and David R. Mayhew. 1981. "Congressional Dynamics and the Decline of Competitive Congressional Elections." In Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

- Cox, Gary W., and Jonathan Katz. 1996. "Why Did the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections Grow?" *American Journal of Political Science* 40:478–97.
- Cox, Gary W., and Jonathan Katz. 2002. *Elbridge Gerry's Salamander: The Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erikson, Robert S. 1972. "Malapportionment, Gerrymandering, and Party Fortunes in Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 66:1234–45.
- Eubank, Robert E. 1985. "Incumbent Effects on Individual Level Voting Behavior in Congressional Elections: A Decade of Exaggeration." *Journal of Politics* 47:958–67.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Ferejohn, John A. 1977. "On the Decline of Competition in Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* 71:166–76.
- Ferejohn, John A., and Randy Calvert. 1984. "Presidential Coattails in Historical Perspective." *American Journal of Political Science* 28:127–46.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1977. "The Case of the Vanishing Marginals: The Bureaucracy Did It." *American Political Science Review* 71:177–81.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. "Some Problems in Studying the Effects of Resource Allocation in Congressional Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 25:543–67.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1989. *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. 2nd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King. 1990. "Estimating the Incumbency Advantage without Bias." *American Journal of Political Science* 34:1142–64.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2010. "A Collective Dilemma Solved: The Distribution of Party Campaign Resources in the 2006 and 2008 Congressional Elections." *Election Law Journal* 9:381–97.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2012. "The Electoral Origins of Polarized Politics: Evidence from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56:1612–30.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2013a. "The Economy and Partisanship in the 2012 Presidential and Congressional Elections." *Political Science Quarterly* 128:1–38.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2013b. "Partisan Polarization in American Politics: A Background Paper." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43 (December): 688–708.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2013c. "Partisanship, Money, and Competition: Elections and the Transformation of Congress since the 1970s." In Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*. 10th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 117–44.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2013d. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 8th ed. New York: Pearson.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2013e. "Presidents, Partisans, and Polarized Politics." In Danial Shea and Morris Fiorina, eds., *Can We Talk? The Rise of Rude, Nasty, Stubborn Politics*. New York: Pearson, 100–122.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2014. "It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in Congressional Elections." Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3–6.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2015. "The Electoral Connection, Then and Now." In Alan Gerber and Erik Schickler, eds., *Governing in a Polarized Age: Elections, Parties, and Political Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
- Kritzer, Herbert M., and Robert B. Eubank. 1979. "Presidential Coattails Revisited: Partisanship and Incumbency Effects." *American Journal of Political Science* 23:615–26.
- Levendusky, Matthew. 2009. *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974a. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Mayhew, David R. 1974b. "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals." *Polity* 6:295–317.
- Nelson, Candice. 1978/79. "The Effects of Incumbency on Voting in Congressional Elections." *Political Science Quarterly* 93:665–78.
- Prior, Marcus. 2006. "The Incumbent in the Living Room: The Rise of Television and the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 68:657–73.
- Romero, David W., and Francine Sanders. 1994. "Loosened Party Attachments and Receptivity to Incumbent Behaviors." *Political Research Quarterly* 47:177–92.
- Stonecash, Jeffrey M. 2012. *Understanding American Political Parties: Democratic Ideals, Political Uncertainty, and Strategic Positioning*. New York: Routledge.