

Partisanship, Incumbency, & Polarization in U.S. Senate Elections, 1920-2016*

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Abstract

Scholars have devoted little attention to addressing the recent decline in the incumbency advantage that was once a well-documented feature of congressional contests, especially in the Senate. Moreover, the relatively scant amount of research that has sought to explain this recent trend focuses on elections for the U.S. House, neglecting changes in the incumbency advantage enjoyed by U.S. Senators. Moreover, the increasing match between Senator partisanship and state partisan preference provides descriptive evidence that the influence of incumbency could be waning as a salient factor in Senate election outcomes. To address these two major gaps within the incumbency advantage literature, this paper proposes and evaluates a theoretical framework that identifies how the magnitude of the incumbency advantage in U.S. Senate elections varies with congressional polarization. Using originally collected data of the entire direct-election era, this paper asks two questions: (1) How has the incumbency advantage changed in Senate elections as the Senate becomes more ideologically polarized? And, (2) Are Senate elections becoming more partisan-centered at the expense of the incumbency advantage? This paper finds evidence that increased polarization increases the salience of partisanship and, with the exception of Senators from politically hostile states, decreases the saliency of incumbency in Senate election outcomes. These findings are confirmed using voter-level data.

Key words: Senate elections, incumbency advantage, partisan-centered elections, polarization

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