

The Influence of Incumbency, Partisanship, Candidate Quality & National Tides in U.S. Senate Elections, 1914-2016

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Abstract

Relative to elections for the U.S. House, little is known about what influences outcomes for the U.S. Senate. While standing models of congressional election outcomes have been applied to the Senate, many of these models fail to account for salient variables, such as candidate quality, or focus their analysis on elections during the candidate-centered era. In this paper, I specify a comprehensive model of Senate election outcomes which focuses on four salient predictors of electoral outcomes: national partisan tides, incumbency, state partisanship, and candidate quality. I then evaluate this model using a novel dataset containing every Senate race since the adoption of the 17th amendment in 1913. Congruent with recent findings in the U.S. House, the model finds evidence that Senate elections are becoming more partisan-centered at the expense of a candidate quality advantage. On the other hand, and contrary to recent studies, the model finds evidence of an incumbency advantage increase in contemporary Senate elections. However, this increase in the incumbency advantage corresponds to a decline in the pivotal role of incumbency in determining Senate election outcomes during a more partisan-centered period of elections. I conclude by showing that Senate elections are becoming more nationalized and president-centered contests.

Key words: Senate elections, incumbency advantage, nationalization of elections

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