

The Conditioning Role of Polarization in U.S. Senate Election Outcomes: A Direct-Election Era & Voter-Level Analysis ^{*}

Carlos Algara [†]

March 2018

Abstract

Recent work finds that a decline in the incumbency advantage coincides with the rise of partisanship as a determinant of congressional electoral outcomes. While this work updates our view of congressional elections, it is unclear if this holds in the more candidate-centered and high-information electoral context of the U.S. Senate. In this paper, I address these two considerations by evaluating a theory positing that polarization conditions the influence of incumbency and partisanship as Senate election determinants. Using data on the entire direct-election Senate era and survey data, this paper finds that: (1) polarization provides a partisan advantage for candidates running in states in which they are members of the partisan majority and (2) polarization positively conditions the incumbency advantage for Senators representing states that favor the other party. These findings suggest that Senators may still successfully cultivate a personal brand in the face of growing ideological differences between the parties.

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

^{*}Version of this paper presented at the 2017 Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL (April 6-9, 2017). I thank Geoffrey Skelley & the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia for sharing comprehensive Senate election data from 1914 to 2014. I also thank Walt Stone, Alex Keena, Chris Hare, the UC Davis American Politics Reading Group & the Graduate Association of Political Science Students Research Workshop for comprehensive & helpful comments.

[†]Department of Political Science, University of California, Davis; calgara@ucdavis.edu.