Article

Nationalization and the Incumbency Advantage

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Abstract
Legislative scholars have investigated both the growth in the incumbency advantage since the early 1970s and its decline in recent decades, but there are several unanswered questions about this phenomenon. In this paper, we examine the incumbency advantage across a much wider swath of history to better understand its connection with changing levels of electoral nationalization. Based on an analysis of U.S. House elections extending back to the antebellum era, we find that the incumbency advantage fluctuates in predictable ways over time with changes in nationalization, which can be a product of both institutional and political conditions. We also demonstrate that the increased influence of local forces in congressional elections may not be strictly necessary nor sufficient for the existence of an incumbency advantage.

Keywords
Congress, incumbency advantage, nationalization, elections

Since the early 1970s, students of congressional elections have investigated the incidence and growth of the incumbency advantage in Congress. What began as an endeavor to identify why incumbents won more often than their challengers (see, e.g., Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974) has evolved into a series of more complex analyses that examine what incumbents are doing well (Cox and Katz 1996; Gelman and King 1990) versus what challengers are doing poorly or not at all (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). More recently, scholars have argued that the incumbency advantage has begun to systematically decline during the past two decades (Erikson 2016; Jacobson 2015). Our analysis builds on this classic body of work that has important implications for representation and finds that incumbents have always been advantaged over their challengers since at least the early nineteenth century. The size of this benefit, however, fluctuates in predictable ways over time with changes in the extent to which elections are "nationalized."

By nationalization, we mean the phenomenon in which top-down forces, such as presidential vote choice or partisanship, inform voter's decisions in congressional elections rather than candidate-specific attributes or local forces. While there are alternative ways to define nationalization, our definition is consistent with other recent studies on nationalization in congressional elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019). What sets our discussion apart from prior research, however, is that we explore the impact of nationalization across a wider swath of history compared with previous work. We

believe it is important to consider this longer period because nationalized elections, as we and other scholars define them, are not a new phenomenon. Elections during the mid- to late nineteenth century, for instance, were often highly partisan and nationalized affairs as a result of electoral institutions that were used at the time (see Burnham 1965; Engstrom and Kernell 2005, 2014).

There are, of course, important differences between the electoral politics of the nineteenth century and today. During the nineteenth century, the strong linkage between presidential and subnational voting, a common measure of nationalization (Brady, D'Onofrio, and Fiorina 2000; Erikson 2016; Jacobson 2015), was a result of electoral institutions, namely the party ballot (Engstrom and Kernell 2005, 2014). In contrast, the nationalization of the past few decades is believed to be a function of the decisions made by, and attitudes among, individual voters (see Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Hopkins 2018; Jacobson 2015). As a result, we believe it is possible for nationalization to have distinct causes in different eras, but similar political effects on elections. These specific differences aside, the return of nationalized electoral conditions provides a unique opportunity to analyze changes

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in elections across a much wider swath of history. By evaluating the advantages that accrue to incumbents dating back to the 1840s, we can gain important new insights not only about both nationalization and the incumbency advantage but also congressional elections more broadly. For instance, candidate entry and exit decisions, behavior within the House of Representatives, patterns of campaign contributions, and many other factors can be influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the level of nationalization (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Jacobson 2015; Thomsen 2017).

Although our analysis suggests incumbents have always enjoyed electoral advantages in different political eras, the magnitude of the incumbency advantage fluctuates in predictable ways over time with changes in both institutional and political conditions. Indeed, our findings offer evidence to support the idea that incumbents enjoy at least some baseline advantage across a large variety of institutional designs and norms. It may, therefore, be the case that an electoral system based on single-member districts will always afford some advantage to the incumbent. Finally, we do find some notable differences across time in the types of factors explaining the magnitude and variation in the incumbency advantage.

Incumbency Advantage in Congress

Students of American politics as well as casual observers routinely note that incumbent members of Congress retain their positions irrespective of factors that would seem to threaten their job security. Even when faced with low institutional approval, a seeming inability to enact meaningful or timely legislation, and strong partisan tides, it is not uncommon for 90% or more of representatives to get reelected (Jacobson and Carson 2020). The ability of incumbents to outperform these circumstances has arguably spurred more discussion within the congressional elections literature than any other issue to date.[1]

Several recent studies, however, contend that the incumbency advantage is considerably smaller than it once was (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Erikson 2016; Jacobson 2015; LeVeck and Nail 2016; Sievert and McKee 2019). Most notably, Jacobson (2015) illustrates that the electoral returns to incumbency have been in a steady decline since the 1980s. According to Jacobson, the rise and subsequent fall in the incumbency advantage can be explained by changes in voter decision making. First, incumbents benefited from a rise in split-ticket voting that weakened the association between voters' choices in congressional and presidential elections. In recent years, however, voters have become far more likely to support the same party in both presidential and subpresidential elections (Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019). According to Hopkins (2018, 3), the

greater correspondence between vote choice across different offices is an important dimension of nationalization because it suggests that "voters use the same criteria to choose candidates across the federal system."

Second, and relatedly, incumbents benefited from lower levels of party loyalty among the electorate. Mann and Wolfinger (1980) found that partisan defection was far more likely among voters affiliated with the challenger's party than it was among an incumbent's co-partisans. Today, however, congressional vote choice is now highly correlated with party identification (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Jacobson 2015). These changes have contributed to an increased nationalization of congressional elections, which has led to incumbents who seek office today enjoying no more of an advantage than their counterparts running in the 1950s. Indeed, incumbents now have a harder time winning in districts that lean toward the opposite party as a result of individuals' tendency to vote a straight ticket (Jacobson 2015; Jacobson and Carson 2020).

How do we reconcile claims about a reduced incumbency advantage with the continued electoral success of incumbents? We believe the answer requires an exploration of one specific factor—the competing strength of national versus local political forces—that has affected election outcomes over the past two centuries. Contemporary congressional elections are not the first instance in which we have observed high rates of incumbent reelection along with more limited candidate-specific effects of incumbency. While most incumbent members of Congress who run for reelection have won since at least the early nineteenth century (Carson and Sievert 2018), incumbents did not always receive an electoral boost on Election Day in earlier historical periods (Carson and Roberts 2013). The common thread linking the earlier period with today is that both were instances in which elections were highly nationalized and voter's partisan loyalty was high (Burnham 1965; Engstrom and Kernell 2005). Our focus on nationalization is not meant to imply that other factors cannot potentially enhance or diminish the incumbency advantage or perhaps even trump the effect of nationalization in specific instances. Instead, we argue that the waxing and waning of nationalization accounts for fluctuations in the effect of incumbent member status over time, which is the focus of our paper.

Nationalization and the Incumbency Advantage Over Time

Jacobson's (2015) findings and conclusions are particularly important for a study of the incumbency advantage across time. The electoral institutions in place throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century led to exactly the type of party-oriented or top-down electoral process that is the

hallmark of nationalized elections (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Hopkins 2018). The use of the party ballot resulted in a greater level of nationalization since the ballot organized voters' choices by party, rather than simply a collection of individual candidates (Engstrom and Kernell 2005, 2014). As a result, the structure of the ballot gave most voters little choice but to vote for all candidates from the same party (Ware 2002). Despite the high levels of nationalization throughout the nineteenth century, there is considerable evidence that attributes of both individual candidates and incumbency structured congressional election outcomes during this period (Carson and Roberts 2013; Carson and Sievert 2017, 2018; Garand and Gross 1984; Gross and Garand 1984). Although the advantage accruing to incumbents was smaller in magnitude during this period, prior research finds evidence that one still existed as far back as the early 1870s (Carson and Roberts 2013).

If nationalization influences the rise and fall of the incumbency advantage, what are we to make of evidence of the latter's existence during a period of highly nationalized elections? We contend that the answer is, at least in part, that it may not be possible to fully erode the advantages of incumbency. As far back as 1820, for instance, a majority of House incumbents who ran for reelection secured another term in office (Carson and Sievert 2018; Garand and Gross 1984). Based on an analysis of House elections from 1824 to 1980, Garand and Gross (1984, 29) conclude that "incumbent winners have always done better than non-incumbent winners." Similarly, Carson and Sievert's (2017) analysis of elections from the party ballot era finds that although the effect of candidate quality was significant in both presidential and midterm election years, it was notably larger in the latter. As such, they conclude that while "nationalization weakens the effect of candidate-specific factors, individual candidates can still influence election outcomes during periods of highly nationalized elections where party line voting is pervasive" (Carson and Sievert, 2017, 542).

It is of course important to acknowledge that there are substantive differences between nationalization in the nineteenth century and today. During the nineteenth century, the strong linkage between presidential and subnational voting, a common measure of nationalization (Brady, D'Onofrio, and Fiorina 2000; Erikson 2016; Jacobson 2015), was a result of electoral institutions, namely the party ballot (Engstrom and Kernell 2005, 2014). By contrast, greater nationalization in more recent elections is generally considered to be a product of voter choices and attitudes, although it remains unclear what might be contributing to such behavior (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Fiorina 2016; Jacobson 2015; Levendusky 2009). Jacobson (2015), for instance, maintains that voters are now more likely to align their voting behavior
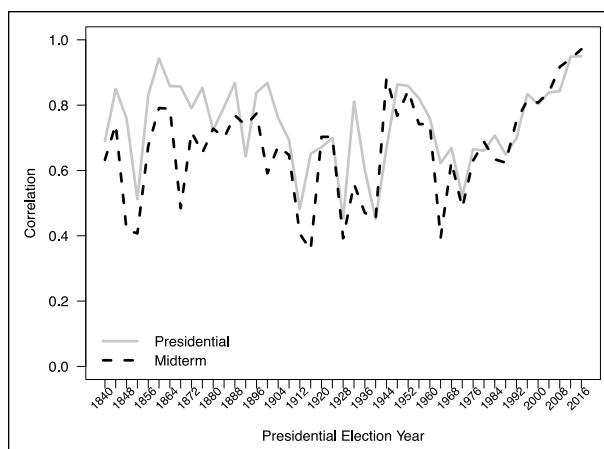
Figure 1. Correlation between presidential and congressional vote share.

across presidential and congressional races in the past couple of decades. This raises an important question that has received little attention to date. Are voters making this choice intentionally or are they simply responding to the more nationalized campaigns that parties and political elites are coordinating? (Fiorina 2016; Morgenstern, Swingle, and Castagnola 2009). If it is the latter, then the increased nationalization we see today may be more analogous to the electoral conditions present during the nineteenth century than previously recognized.[2]

These differences in the factors producing more nationalized elections have important consequences as it means that contemporary congressional voters are still able to divide their support amongst parties, even if fewer of them choose to do so. For example, very few congressional incumbents in 2016 represented districts won by the other party's presidential candidate, but those that did still won reelection at surprisingly high rates (Jacobson 2017, 28). Such an outcome would have been extremely unlikely under the party ballot in cases where the presidential and congressional candidates appeared on the same ballot.

To help demonstrate both the differences across these two historical periods and general patterns in nationalization, we examined the relationship between presidential and congressional election outcomes, which is a common measure of nationalization (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Engstrom and Kernell 2014; Jacobson 2015; Sievert and McKee 2019), across the entire time period of our study. Figure 1 reports the correlation between the district-level Democratic share of the vote for presidential and congressional elections.[3] We report the correlations separately for presidential (solid gray line) and midterm (dashed black line) election years. There are several notable patterns in Figure 1. First, the correlation between presidential and congressional elections is quite

high throughout the party ballot era and, at times, reaches levels comparable to the modern era.[4] There is a marked drop in correlation though during midterm election years, which comports with the idea of an institutions-induced nationalization.

Second, while the two series begin to track each other more closely in the post-party ballot period, there are still several instances in which the correlation rises during presidential years before dropping during midterm elections. Similarly, the overall correlation between the two drops during the early twentieth century. The growing disconnect between presidential and congressional elections is consistent with the rise of localized factors noted in other studies (Brady, D'Onofrio, and Fiorina 2000; Jacobson 2015). Finally, since 1968, the correlation between presidential and congressional vote has not only increased but there have been few differences between presidential and midterm election years. The tight correspondence between these two series is consistent with our earlier point that the newest period of nationalization is likely a function of parties coordinating more nationalized campaigns in recent decades (Fiorina 2016).

Based on these considerations, we posit that nationalization can assist us in explaining fluctuations in the effect of incumbency over time. To be clear, we are not suggesting that other factors cannot strengthen or weaken the incumbency advantage or even undermine the effect of nationalization in specific instances. Our argument is rather that nationalization establishes a baseline for the potential electoral effects of incumbency. We therefore expect that the direct, or candidate-specific, effect of incumbency (Cox and Katz 1996; Erikson and Titiunik 2015) should be greatest in periods of low nationalization. Other factors, such as a scare-off effect (Cox and Katz 1996), may remain relevant even in periods of highly nationalized elections if potential challengers are still strategic about when and where they decide to run (Jacobson and Kernell 1983).[5] Indeed, this expectation comports with the growing evidence of candidate-specific effects during the greater nationalization of the mid- to late nineteenth century (Carson and Roberts 2013; Carson and Sievert 2017). Finally, if nationalization is an important driver of the incumbency advantage, it should also follow that the higher levels of the advantage observed between the 1960s and 1990s are anomalous when viewed in a larger time frame.

In sum, we theorize that even as far back as the 1840s, representatives seeking to return to Congress had the opportunity to accrue certain benefits that made them more likely to win their reelection bids (see, e.g., Engstrom 2012; Finocchiaro and MacKenzie 2018). However, we also maintain that this incumbency advantage can increase in eras of low nationalization but will decrease when nationalization rises as we have seen during the past few decades. Furthermore, we argue that nationalization can have distinct causes at different times in history. Between 1840 and 2016, for instance, nationalization may be a product of either institutional features (i.e., the party ballot in use during the nineteenth century) or extra-institutional features (i.e., polarization and more uniform voter preferences). Regardless, the dampening effect of nationalization on the *overall* incumbency advantage will appear largely the same regardless of the underlying cause.

Measuring the Incumbency Advantage

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars seeking to account for the incumbency advantage began to develop more rigorous and sophisticated measurements of this phenomenon (Cox and Katz 1996; Gelman and King 1990).[6] One of the key insights from the development of these regression-based estimators was that common measures of the incumbency advantage (e.g., the sophomore surge or retirement slump) are biased and/or inconsistent since they are based on a relatively small sample of legislative races in a given election year (Gelman and King 1990).[7] While a detailed discussion of the empirical and theoretical arguments about the benefits of regression is beyond the scope of this paper, we want to briefly review the Cox and Katz (1996) estimator that we will use for our empirical analysis.

Cox and Katz (1996) argue that the incumbency advantage is composed of both a direct and an indirect effect. The direct effect is simply the "perks" associated with being an incumbent (e.g., resources, constituency service), while the indirect effect can be thought of as the ability to deter high-quality challengers from entering the election. They break the indirect component down further into a quality effect, which is analogous to Jacobson's (1989) candidate quality effect, and a scare-off effect, which captures the ability of incumbents to deter higher quality challengers from running against them. Cox and Katz posit that the dramatic growth in the incumbency advantage during the second half of the twentieth century was a product of an increase in the quality effect.

To model both the direct and the indirect components, Cox and Katz present two separate regression models. The outcome variable in the first model is the Democratic share of the two-party vote and the measure of incumbency also remains the same as in the Gelman–King model. Cox and Katz do, however, include two additional control variables. The first is a measure of lagged incumbency ($Incumbent_{it-1}$), while the second measure controls for candidate quality in the current and past election (DQA_{it} and DQA_{it-1}). The latter measures are coded 1 if the Democratic candidate is the only one who previously

held an elected office, 0 if neither candidate has previously held an elected position, and –1 when a non-Democratic candidate is the only one who previously held an elected office. As before, the estimate for θ captures the direct effect of incumbency and the estimate for ρ denotes the "quality" effect:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{Dem. Vote}_{it} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{Party}_{it} \\
& + \theta \text{Incumbent}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{Incumbent}_{it-1} \quad (1) \\
& + \rho \text{DQA}_{it} + \beta_5 \text{DQA}_{it-1} + \epsilon_{it},
\end{aligned}
$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{DQA}_{it} = {} & \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \gamma_2 \text{Party}_{it} \\
& + \delta \text{Incumbent}_{it} + \gamma_3 \text{Incumbent}_{it-1} \quad (2) \\
& + \gamma_5 \text{DQA}_{it-1} + \upsilon_{it}.
\end{aligned}
$$

In the second regression model, the outcome variable, DQA_{it}, measures the candidate quality advantage in a given race. The predictors are largely the same, but now the estimate for the incumbency measure is said to represent the "scare-off" effect of having an incumbent in the race. Cox and Katz calculate the indirect incumbency advantage by multiplying the coefficient estimates for the quality effect from the first regression model and the coefficient estimate for the scare-off effect in the second regression model. The overall incumbency advantage is then calculated by adding the direct and indirect effects $(\theta + \rho\delta)$.

Data

For the analysis of the effects of nationalization on the incumbency advantage over time, we needed to identify two key pieces of information for each congressional election from 1840 to 2016. While data from the contemporary era is readily available, obtaining data on historical elections can prove to be more of a challenge. Our data collection efforts were largely facilitated by Dubin's (1998) *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*, the most comprehensive source for historical election returns. We used Dubin (1998) to identify the names and partisan affiliation of the candidates in all congressional elections before 1946, which allowed us to determine whether the race included an incumbent or was an open seat contest. We also used this source to code the vote totals for each candidate, which allows us to calculate the Democratic share of the two-party vote in each election. We relied on Martis' (1989) *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States, 1789–1989* to fill in any gaps in party identification.

There are two important issues we had to address when calculating vote shares in the historical period. First, until the Supreme Court's ruling in the 1960s, congressional districts varied considerably in terms of both population and geographic boundaries. Some states used multi-member or at-large districts, which can pose possible measurement issues in terms of calculating the partisan vote share. We therefore matched the winning candidates with the losing candidates who ultimately came closest to winning, which allows for a direct comparison between vote shares in both single- and multi-member districts.[8] Second, although there is fluctuation in the composition of the two main parties, the Democratic Party contested elections throughout the entire time period we examine. As such, we code the two-party vote with reference to the top Democratic finisher and the top opposition party finisher. For elections in the 1840s and 1850s, a Whig candidate is usually the main opposition candidate.[9] From the 1860s onward, however, the Republican Party serves as the opposition party.

Since candidate quality plays an important role in some of the regression-based estimates of the incumbency advantage, it was also necessary to collect data on candidates' political backgrounds. Our data on candidate quality in congressional elections since 1946 come from Jacobson and Carson (2020), whereas our data for the period from 1872 to 1944 come from Carson and Roberts (2013). Unlike data on election returns, finding information about candidates' backgrounds from earlier time periods required far more time and effort to collect. To extend the data on candidates' backgrounds back to 1840, we used a number of archives and online sources. We began our search with the *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774 to Present*, which provides a detailed career history of every legislator who has served in the U.S. Congress.[10] Since there was more legislative turnover throughout the nineteenth century (see Fiorina, Rohde, and Wissel 1975), the *Directory* allowed us to obtain background information on a large portion of the candidates from this era. For candidates who did not serve in Congress, we first turned to "The Political Graveyard" website,[11] which provides background data on politicians (in addition to where they are buried). Additional background information was collected from the *New York Times* Historical Index and *Google™*.[12]

Once we compiled background information on each candidate, we followed Jacobson's (1989) approach and measured candidate quality as whether or not a candidate currently holds or has previously held elective office. Although some studies advocate for more nuanced measures, we chose to use the simple dichotomy in our data collection for two specific reasons. First, there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that a dichotomous measure of candidate quality performs as well as more nuanced measures (Jacobson and Carson 2020). Second, our primary empirical interest is obtaining estimates of the incumbency advantage over a broader time period. As such, it is important to keep our coding scheme the same

as the original studies, which use, or are extensions of, this dichotomous measure.

Results

In the analysis that follows, we examine variation in the direct and indirect components of the Cox–Katz measure over time, which are reported in Figure 2. The first panel of Figure 2 reports the direct effect of incumbency as derived from the Cox–Katz regression-based estimator. The direct effect of incumbency exhibits a notable jump that occurs in the late 1960s and is followed by a downturn in the 1990s that has continued in recent elections. These trends are consistent with Jacobson's (2015) expectations about the impact of nationalization on the incumbency advantage. Notably, the estimate for the direct effect of incumbency is also small in magnitude and often statistically insignificant during the nineteenth century, which is consistent with our theoretical expectation that nationalization should, in general, diminish the personal component of incumbency.

The second panel of Figure 2 reports the indirect effect of incumbency, which is a product of both a candidate quality component and a scare-off effect. These results reveal two interesting patterns. First, the overall incumbency advantage appears to be driven by different forces across the entire time period we examine. During the nineteenth century, the incumbency advantage was more likely to be a product of the indirect component, which was of comparable or larger magnitude than the direct effect throughout this period. The post–World War II growth in the incumbency advantage was, however, driven by a large increase in the direct effect. While the indirect and direct components were of comparable magnitude during the nineteenth century, the direct effect was often two to three times larger during the post-1960s era.

Second, the relationship between nationalization and the indirect effects of incumbency is far weaker. While the overall incumbency advantage has declined steadily since the 1990s, the indirect component has been more volatile with the estimate for recent elections comparable to earlier, less-nationalized elections. Notably, the indirect effect was of comparable magnitude during the previous high point of nationalization in the mid- to late nineteenth century to the estimates from the 1960s to present. The indirect effect reaches its highest point during the early twentieth century, a time when both the overall incumbency advantage and the direct effect were quite low. The growth of the indirect effect in these decades is notable since candidate-centered elections began to emerge during this period (Carson and Roberts 2013; Ware 2002).

Finally, we also explored the individual components—scare-off and quality effect—of the indirect effect of
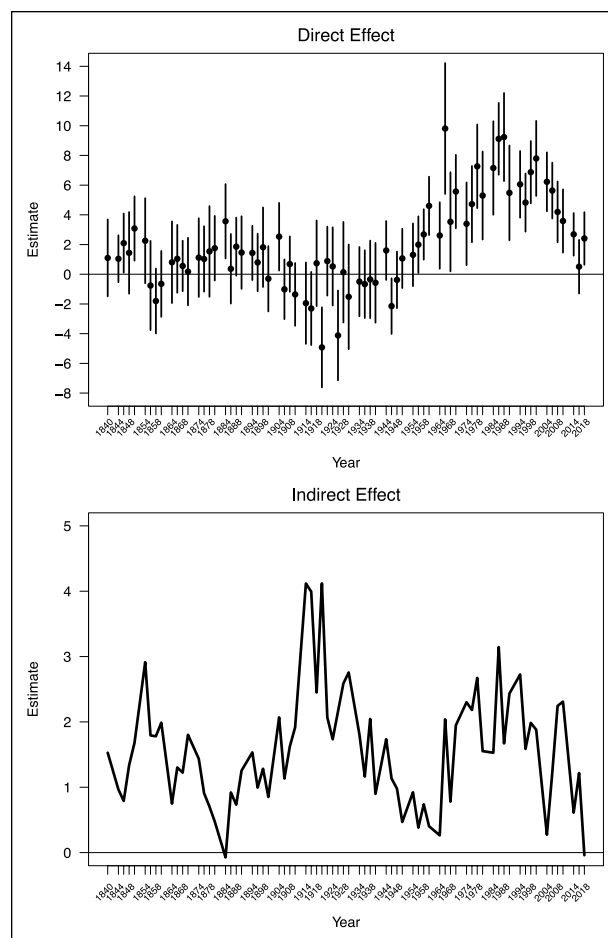
Figure 2. Direct and indirect effects of incumbency from Cox–Katz estimator by year.

incumbency. For now, we focus specifically on the scare-off component since, like the direct effect, it is based on a comparison of incumbents and non-incumbents.[13] In Figure 3, we report the coefficient estimate for scare-off along with the corresponding 95% confidence intervals. We also applied a LOESS (locally estimated scatterplot smoothing) smoother to the data, depicted by the gray line, to explore trends over time. While the direct and indirect effects (Figure 2) of incumbency moved in tandem with changes in nationalization, the scare-off effect shows no such relationship. Indeed, the scare-off effect has been comparatively stable since the 1920s and is in fact higher now than during the less-nationalized period prior to the 1950s. During the nineteenth century, there does not appear to be a clear relationship with nationalization. While the scare-off effect was quite pronounced early in the party ballot era, it drops markedly in the 1860s, but begins to rebound as electoral reforms like the Australian ballot and direct primary are adopted. In short, while changes in nationalization may affect the direct electoral returns to incumbency, it appears to be largely unrelated to
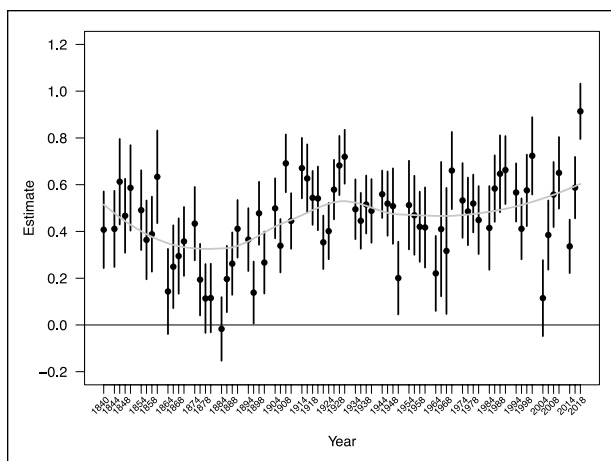
Figure 3. Scare-off effect estimates from Cox–Katz estimator by year.
The black dots denote the coefficient estimate for the scare-off effect, and the black lines report the 95% confidence intervals. The gray line is a LOESS smoother.
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more indirect effects like an incumbent's ability to discourage quality candidates from entering a race.[14]

While the results reported above are informative in understanding the relationship between nationalization and incumbency advantage, they do not directly examine the relative influence of national forces and incumbency. To perform such a test, we compare the predictive power of regression analysis that includes only national-level forces, such as partisanship or presidential vote, against a regression model that includes both national and local forces. Since nationalized elections imply that top-down forces, such as presidential vote or partisanship, are the primary factors that shape election outcomes (Hopkins 2018), the second model should add little in the way of explanatory power during periods of high nationalization. When nationalization wanes, however, local forces, like incumbency, should provide additional explanatory power above and beyond national forces.

The outcome variable for this analysis is coded 1 if a Democrat won and 0 if a Whig or Republican won. Since our outcome variable is binary, we use logistic regression models for the analysis reported below. In the first regression model, the only predictor is the district-level Democratic presidential vote, which captures national-level forces. For the second regression model, we include both presidential vote and the measure of incumbency discussed. We then calculated the proportion of cases correctly predicted (PCP) for both sets of models. The PCP for Model 1 provides an indication of how well a national-forces only model explains election outcomes. As indicated above, under a highly nationalized electoral environment, this single covariate should correctly predict

the partisan outcome of a high percentage of House elections. To ascertain whether, or if, incumbency adds additional explanatory power, we take the difference between the PCP for Models 1 and 2. As this second quantity approaches zero, we can infer that incumbency adds little explanatory power, which would be consistent with partisan-centered, nationalized elections. When the difference between the PCP for these two models increases, we can infer that incumbency helps to capture important differences between districts that are otherwise similar with respect to their presidential vote share.

For the first step of our analysis, we estimated the model outlined above by decade for all districts as well as marginal districts.[15] The comparison across district types is important because nationalization should have the same effect regardless of district-level competitiveness. Since the number of cases in a given year for marginal districts can be relatively small, we pooled the data by decade to ensure there were an adequate number of cases and to allow for a comparison over time. The first panel of Figure 4 reports the findings for all districts, while the second panel reports the estimates for marginal districts.

As expected, the regression model with only presidential vote (Model 1) correctly predicts a large share of election outcomes for the pooled model during the party ballot era—between 75% and 85%—and the last two decades—84% and 92%, respectively—both periods of high nationalization. Similarly, the addition of incumbency (Model 2) offers only slight improvements to our predictive power in either time period. From the 1840s to the 1890s, for instance, the difference in PCP between Models 1 and 2 approaches zero. During the most recent decade, the inclusion of incumbency adds a modest 2.5 percentage points to our predictive power and a more sizable 8.3 percentage points for the early 2000s. It is important to note that although the predictive power of presidential vote is the same across the two periods, the inclusion of incumbency, at least in the early 2000s, did produce a non-trivial improvement in our explanatory power. These differences are consistent with our prior observation that while the consequences of nationalization may be the same across the two periods, the mechanisms underlying this process, one institutional and other voter choices, will differ. Indeed, the removal of the institutional barriers to voter choice mean that while *most* voters choose to cast a straight ticket today, incumbency does help us explain the outcome of at least a non-trivial number of cases. It is, of course, important to note that this 8 percentage point increase is far smaller than the 15 or 20 percentage point increase during the less-nationalized mid-twentieth century.

Although the findings for the pooled model comport with expectations of prior research on nationalization, the analysis of marginal districts tells a different story. As
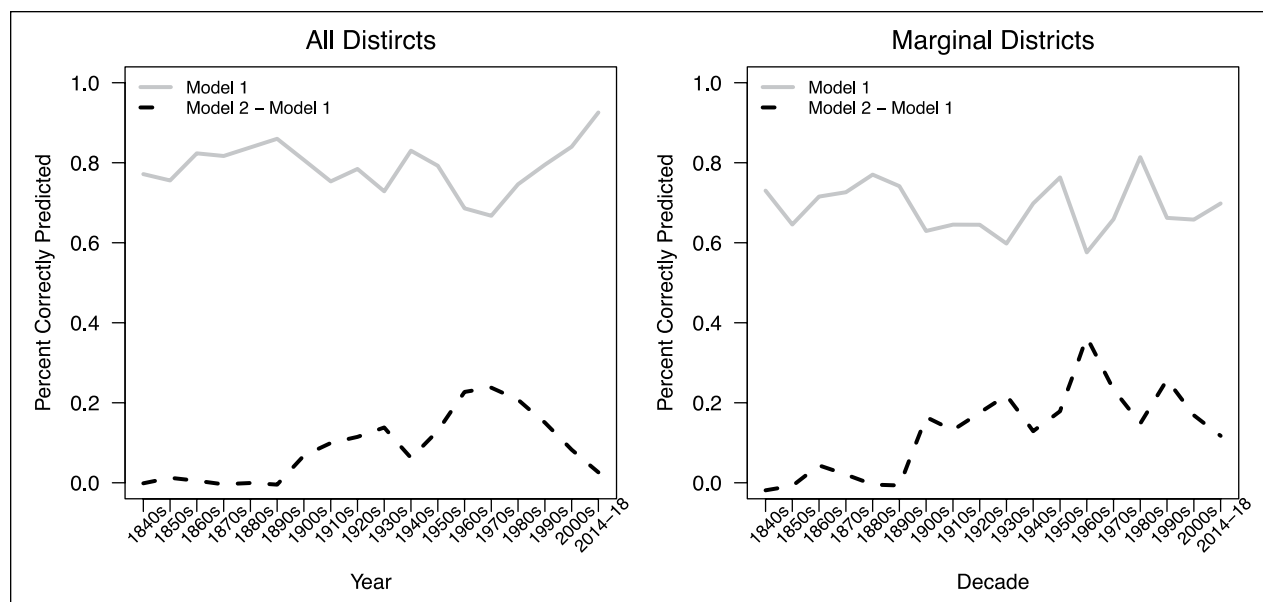
Figure 4. Comparison of model predictions, all cases and marginal districts.
The solid gray line denotes the PCP for Model 1, and the dashed black line denotes the difference between the PCP for Models 1 and 2. PCP = proportion of cases correctly predicted.

before, presidential vote alone explains a high percentage, usually around 70%, of election outcomes during the party ballot era. Similarly, the inclusion of incumbency does little to improve the model's explanatory power during this era, between 0 and 4 percentage points. We find a different pattern, however, during the modern era. While presidential vote still predicts the outcome in a majority of marginal races, between 65% and 70% in each decade since the 1970s except for the 1980s, the inclusion of incumbency continues to add some explanatory power. In the 1970s and 1990s, the inclusion of incumbency increased the PCP by between 23 and 25 percentage points. For the 1980s and first two decades of the twentieth century, we find between an 11 and 16 percentage point increase in the PCP. While there are fewer marginal districts today than during the party ballot period (Jacobson and Carson 2020), the fact that nationalization is a product of voter choice rather than institutional arrangements has important consequences in these competitive districts. Most notably, while partisanship and national forces still explain a large share of the variance in election outcomes, incumbency explains some of this variance above and beyond what was possible during a period of institution-induced nationalization.

For the second stage of our analysis, we conduct an analysis similar to the one reported in Figure 4, but focus on comparisons in presidential and midterm elections. During the party ballot period, nationalization varied across presidential and midterm years (Carson and Sievert 2017).[16] In the modern era, nationalization does not ebb

and flow based on whether or not the president is on the ballot (Jacobson 2019). We therefore should expect to find differences across election types for the two periods of nationalized elections. While the district-level presidential vote should explain a high percentage of election outcomes in the party ballot era, it should be less predictive of midterm election outcomes. When nationalization is a product of voter choice rather than institutions, however, there should be little difference between presidential and midterm elections.

In Figure 5, we report the PCP for Model 1 for presidential election years (gray line) and the PCP for Model 1 for midterm years (black dashed line). During the party ballot era, district-level presidential vote explains between 85% and 90% of election outcomes. These figures are roughly comparable to the last two decades and between 10 and 20 percentage points higher than any decade during the twentieth century. There are differences, however, between the two periods when we examine midterm elections. While presidential vote predicts a comparable share of congressional midterm election outcomes during the twentieth century, it has far less explanatory power during the party ballot period. Across the five decades in which the party ballot was in use, presidential vote alone never explains more than 79% of election outcomes—which occurs during the 1880s—and is as low as 69% in the 1840s. As such, the PCP for midterm years is frequently 15 to 20 percentage points lower between presidential and midterm election years, which is consistent with prior findings about how
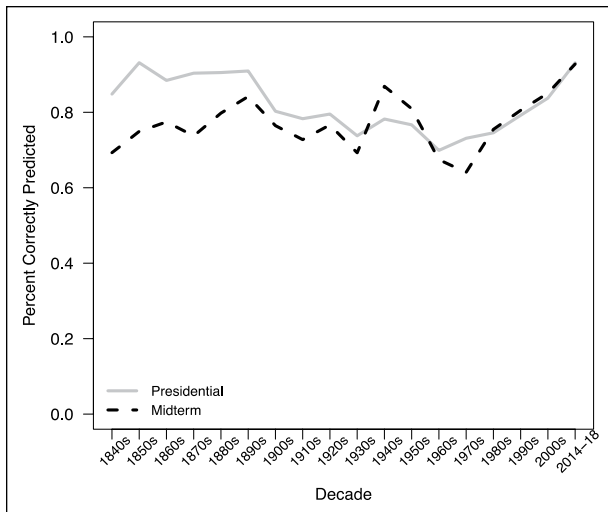
Figure 5. Comparison of model predictions, presidential and midterm election years.
The solid gray line denotes the PCP for Model 1 during presidential election years, and the dashed black line denotes the PCP for Model 1 during midterm election years. PCP = proportion of cases correctly predicted.

ballot laws influenced nationalization during the nineteenth century.

Based on the analyses reported above, we not only find differences across election years but also find interesting variation across election types and years that points to important differences between the two periods of nationalized elections. As the relative influence of national and local forces changed, the incumbency advantage moved in response. Indeed, the benefits of incumbency were clearly important at times when elections were more likely to be influenced by local, rather than national, considerations. Our examination of the effects of nationalized elections suggests additional insights about our earlier observations regarding the indirect effects of incumbency. Indeed, the indirect component of incumbency appears to be stable and of a comparable magnitude regardless of how nationalized elections were. Conversely, the direct effect of incumbency increased substantially as national conditions and forces receded. As such, we believe the indirect effect may be the key component to understanding the incumbency advantage throughout much of the historical elections included in our analysis. Nevertheless, the direct benefits of incumbency were equally as important at times when elections were more likely to be influenced by local, rather than national, considerations.

Conclusion

Despite the enormous attention given to the incumbency advantage in the congressional elections literature, there

are still a number of unanswered questions about its underlying causes, explanations for the variation in the benefits of being an incumbent, and its direct implications for democratic governance. Based on our analysis of the incumbency advantage over a longer time span than previous analyses, several conclusions are clear. First, incumbents have nearly always been advantaged by their position in office, and the size of that advantage has fluctuated over time with changing political conditions such as levels of nationalization. As such, the recent decline in the incumbency advantage (Jacobson 2015) is in reality a return to a more typical historical pattern.

More importantly, from the perspective of democratic theory, institutional features can cause fluctuations in the overall effect of incumbency on electoral outcomes, but this advantage persists across a large variety of institutional designs and norms. It may well be that an electoral system based on single-member districts will always afford some advantage to the incumbent, which will in turn depress competition. Future research should therefore focus on other factors—both institutional and extra-institutional—that are constant in some way across time and help to establish a baseline of support for incumbent House candidates.

Second, the increased incumbency advantage during the latter half of the twentieth century was likely anomalous and a product of markedly lower levels of nationalization.[17] It is important to note that we do find some evidence, however, of a direct incumbency advantage across earlier historical periods. Our results suggest that the magnitude of the incumbency advantage was a function of the nationalization of elections and the electoral rules and institutions in place at the time. In this way, our results comport with prior studies that find evidence of variation in the incumbency advantage due to various electoral reforms including adoption of the Australian ballot, the demise of patronage, adoption of primary elections, and further balloting and technological changes in the twentieth century (Carson and Roberts 2013).

More recent changes to the levels of nationalization seen in elections could be attributed to a variety of factors. Our findings, particularly the comparative stability of the scare-off effect, comports with other work that focuses on the supply of candidates (Thomsen 2017). A decrease in the supply of moderate candidates who run for Congress would no doubt lead to a decrease in split-ticket voting as voters are primarily presented with two polarized options. In future research, it could be informative to engage in a more direct test (e.g., survey experiments) of the connection between the supple of candidates and the nationalization of elections. Another explanation for more recent nationalization is the collapse of regional differences within parties. Indeed, there are now fewer regional differences in the types of candidates elected to

represent each party (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016), and the connection between presidential and sub-presidential elections varies less by region than it did only a few decades ago (Sievert and McKee 2019). Although we do not examine regional differences here, our supplemental appendix provides a comparison of the incumbency advantage by region that provide suggestive evidence to support such a claim.[18]

Third, there is considerable disagreement in the literature over the causes and growth of the incumbency advantage. Much of that disagreement stems from an examination of roughly the same 50- to 60-year period during the modern era. In fact, there is even a dispute over whether the advantages accruing to incumbents are more partisan or personal (Erikson 2016). By extending our analysis of the incumbency advantage across time and employing a number of different measures, we find that the era given the most attention (from the 1960s onward) is actually an outlier when compared with the much wider period of history in our analysis. Therefore, our understanding of the incumbency advantage may be biased by the fact that nearly all studies have observed this effect at its peak.

Additional work on the effects of incumbent status on electoral outcomes will need to consider the broader trends of this phenomenon as discussed in this paper. Furthermore, it is important for future research to also focus on the substantive implications of this work. Why are incumbents so advantaged and what does this imply for the health of democracy in this nation? What role do voters play in the incumbency advantage? Are they simply too indifferent and disengaged from politics to concern themselves with holding incumbents accountable, except for in extreme cases? If so, what can be done, if anything, to combat this? Similarly, does this effect carry over to other offices, both state and federal, in magnitude and across time? It would follow that increased nationalization does not stop with federal offices, and we expect that uncovering the relationship between incumbency and other elected positions would further bolster the findings we have presented here.

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Notes

1. Congressional scholars began investigating the advantages of incumbency as far back as the early 1970s (see, for example, Erikson 1971; Fiorina 1977; Mayhew 1974). From there, scholars sought to identify factors responsible for cultivating this electoral phenomenon ranging from institutional features such as legislative casework (Fiorina 1977), legislative activism (Johannes and McAdams 1981), advertising (Cover and Brumberg 1982), and replacement among members (Alford and Hibbing 1981). Others argued that the advantage can be explained by legislators' personal home styles in their districts (Fenno 1978), rational entry and exit decisions by strategic candidates (Cox and Katz 1996; Jacobson and Kernell 1983), a growing "personal" vote (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), the growing costs of congressional campaigns (Abramowitz 1991), and a greater emphasis on television appearances in a candidate-centered electoral era (Prior 2007).

2. Although we do not tackle this issue directly in the paper, we think it is an area that is ripe for future research on the continued study of nationalization of elections.

3. To generate a measure of the presidential vote by congressional district, we follow the approach employed by Carson and Roberts (2013). Specifically, we relied on ICPSR Study 8611, which reports both presidential and congressional vote at the county level. Fortunately, our construction of the district-level measure was simplified by the inclusion of a variable in the data set that mapped each county to its corresponding congressional district(s). For those districts composed entirely of whole counties (which was a very high percentage of them during the period under examination), it was simply a matter of aggregating the county-level data to the district level. For those remaining districts composed of a combination of whole and partial counties, the procedure used to generate district-level data was slightly more complicated. For multi-district counties, we followed the aggregation method adopted by Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001, 155), wherein they included "cases where the percentage of the district's population that was contained in whole counties was at least 50 percent" and excluded those that did not meet this criterion. Parsons, Dubin, and Parsons (1990) were especially useful for determining whether the population within a county represented at least 50% of the district's total population.

In the end, the excluded districts all came from a few large urban areas (e.g., New York, Philadelphia, Chicago) where it was impossible to map county-level data onto the appropriate congressional districts. This is not optimal, as party machines were stronger in these urban areas, which could influence the ultimate outcome of the election. However, much like today, many urban districts were not competitive electorally as they were almost always controlled by the Democrats. As such, including these districts in models without presidential vote share as a covariate does not alter our findings. Finally, at-large districts were aggregated for the entire state as a whole, and those totals were used for each of the respective at-large districts if more than one was in existence in a given year.

4. The greater variability during historical presidential elections is likely a function of election timing since congressional elections were held in the months before and after the presidential election year throughout large swaths of the nineteenth century (Carson and Sievert 2017; Engstrom and Kernell 2005).

5. For example, in 2016, there were twenty-three congressional districts in which Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but a Republican incumbent won reelection. In total, a quality challenger emerged in only six of these twenty-three districts.

6. The estimates of the overall incumbency advantage are quite similar across both the Gelman–King and the Cox–Katz estimators (see Cox and Katz 1996, 487). We therefore elect to focus solely on the Cox–Katz measure as it builds on the Gelman–King estimator by adding a potentially critical term. In the supplemental appendix, we provide a comparison of the results from each model for the period under study.

7. Although Erikson (1971) noted that traditional measures of the incumbency advantage, such as the retirement slump or the sophomore surge, could result in biased estimates, Gelman and King (1990) were the first to formally demonstrate the nature of this bias.

8. An alternative method for dealing with this issue would be to employ Niemi, Jackman, and Winsky's (1991) approach to calculating vote share in multi-member districts by generating sets of pseudo-pairs between winning and losing candidates. Unfortunately, this approach can lead to an artificial inflation in candidate vote share among non-symmetrically contested races where candidates appear to receive 100% of the vote.

9. In the 1850s, elections in the Southern states typically featured a Democrat and an American Party candidate. Most studies treat the American Party as a third party, but in the South, it can be effectively thought of as one of the two major parties in congressional elections. As such, we treat the American Party as the second party in these states when calculating the two-party vote.

10. The biographical directory link is http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp.

11. The Political Graveyard website can be accessed at http://www.politicalgraveyard.com.

12. We were able to collect background data on just over 75% of the candidates in elections before 1944. In cases where we could not find any background information, we followed Jacobson's (1989) approach and coded these candidates as non-quality. The results we report are robust to alternative specifications, such as Carson and Roberts' (2013) imputation strategy.

13. We report the quality effect by year in the supplemental appendix.

14. The nationalization of elections is a distinct concept from national conditions, such as the state of the economy or presidential popularity, which can favorably affect candidate entry decisions (Jacobson 1989).

15. We define marginal districts as those in which the Democratic presidential vote was greater than 45% and less than 55%.

16. During the party ballot era, there were still instances in which congressional candidates may have been affected by gubernatorial coattails. Carson and Sievert (2018) explore this possibility for midterm election years during 1840s through the 1880s. Their findings reveal two important patterns. First, many midterm congressional elections were not held at the same time as gubernatorial contests. Second, their analysis suggests that candidate recruitment had a larger impact on which party won rather than the presence of a gubernatorial candidate. These results appear to comport with our claim about the relative impact of national and local forces across midterm and presidential elections. Furthermore, it is important to note that the nationalization of statewide elections, both historically and in the modern era, exhibits a similar over-time pattern to those reported in Figure 1 and varies based on both electoral institutions and election timing (Engstrom and Kernell 2014; Sievert and McKee 2019).

17. Such an interpretation is consistent with Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart's (2001) findings regarding candidate positioning in House elections.

18. While it is beyond the scope of our current project, we would note that other scholars point to changes in the media environment that place greater emphasis on national rather than local issues may help contribute to the overall nationalization of politics (Hopkins 2018). Similarly, scholars may want to consider how the proliferation of spending by political action committees following the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision affects that variability of the incumbency advantage and other related phenomena.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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