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GOV 2060

Midterm Exam

**Short Answer Questions:**

2. The one-person, one-vote standard was established during the civil rights era in order to establish a system where each individual’s voice was heard in the electoral process. Prior to this era, congressional districts were not required to have representatives proportional to the number of constituents. However, as urbanization took hold, rural districts ended up having proportionally more representatives. In response to this, the court ruled that each person’s vote counted equally, removing the ⅗ compromise and requiring states to actually redistrict. Still, Senate seats are disproportionate to this day, and issues of gerrymandering are still prevalent.

4. In the end of the 20th century, the proportion of incumbents in the house receiving over 60% of the major-party vote increased greatly, diverging from open-seat winners. In the reading, this increase in incumbents above the margin (60% of votes) is attributed to the decline of party machines in the progressive era, which de-incentivized challengers as they would not receive the same ‘perks’ they did before. This declined in the beginning of the 21st century, when competition revived.

5. Slurge refers to the combination of “sophomore slump” and the “retirement surge”--namely, the gain in vote share of their party first-time incumbents receive and the drop in the same party’s vote share when the seat opens up (JacobCarson 6). Essentially, this measures party loyalty as the average of the two indicates how the district votes for the same party when there is a new incumbent and when there is no longer an incumbent. The slurge helps measure incumbency advantage as a high slurge means that the incumbent gained a lot of vote share, and then that party lost a lot of votes when the incumbent left.

9. The magic word tests refers to only allowing political party organizations to spend their soft money on political advertising that does not include overtly partisan language. This was supposed to prevent supporting one candidate over the other and measure whether independent expenditure committees were following this rule. However, a political message could still be crafted by avoiding magic words and still conveying a partisan message, such as being pro-fracking. While political party organizations can no longer raise soft money, independent groups are still allowed to raise unlimited amounts of money as long as they spend it independent of candidates (ch. 4 in the text).

8. The Comey letter was perfectly timed-- just days before the election, it sank Clinton’s polls just days before the election. Dominating the news for the entire week leading up to the election, this result was inevitable. However, to say that the letter itself caused her loss is an over-statement. The media had been crafting a narrative of Clinton’s dishonestness for months, with consistent coverage of Clinton’s scandals throughout the entire campaign. Everyone knew about the scandal, and her news was almost as negative as Trump’s news (146). The difference was that the Daily Donald show changed every day--there were too many scandals to keep track of! Clinton’s emails, on the other hand, were consistent throughout the campaign. Thus, while the Comey letter clearly plummeted her polling data, it would be an over extrapolation to say that this caused her to lose; rather, it sealed the deal on an already overwhelming narrative.

**Essay Questions:**

What is the incumbency advantage? Where did it come from, and how has it changed over time?

Incumbents face a lot of perks in our electoral system--the obvious ones include name recognition, easier access to voters, and the ability to raise money more easily than their opponents. While the process of voting for congress members boils down to just choosing the familiar name on the ballot for many people, we forget just how young our candidate-centered electoral process is. It wasn’t until 1913 that senators were elected by popular vote rather than state legislatures. Analyzing the incumbency advantage is one way to look at the changes in the structure of congress over the last century. Since the early 20th century, we have seen rates of re election for congress members both spike and fall. The reasons for this go beyond the obvious advantages of incumbents, instead telling a more compelling story about who we vote for and why.

The incumbency advantage can be described as the percent vote shares a candidate will gain simply by being an incumbent. In other words, if we had two parallel universes which had identical candidates but one was an incumbent and one wasn’t, the incumbent may get 60% of the vote while the challenger only gets 50%. This hypothetical example seems a bit extreme, *ten percentage points?!*, but it reflects the incumbency advantage during its hayday in the 1980s. One fundamental nature of campaigns is that many races tend to be very close, with the winner only having a slight majority of votes. As a result of our first past the post system, this means that many seats are gained on the margin. The impact this has on challengers is that if they lose by just a small percent of votes, as often happens, their loss can be greatly attributed to the incumbency advantage! One straightforward way of measuring the incumbency advantage in a state analytically is by calculating the slurge, the average of the gain in vote share won by first time incumbents and the vote share drop when the incumbent’s seat opens (6).

It is argued that the incumbency advantage has existed as long as the popular vote for members of congress have existed. What has fluctuated is the size of this advantage over time, which has been increasingly studied since the spike in incumbency advantage in the 1960s and the increasing availability of data. The desire for accurate data has increased as simple measures such as the slurge and the swing ratio often give inaccurate numbers. Yet, the story of incumbency advantage over the last century can be seen in the broader context of our country’s politics--namely, World War II, increasing power of congress members, declining party machines, and the number of qualified challengers.

Jacob and Carlson point out that following World War II, the scope of the federal government greatly increased in size and scope (Jacobson and Carson 13). As a result, congress members were able to pass legislation that gave them many resources which could be used in their reelection campaigns. These include personal staff for senate and house members, travel allowances, and free mail and telephone services to reach voters. All of this helped incumbents influence public opinion in their favor. We saw this occurring in the 1960s, which is precisely when the incumbency advantage really began to pick up. Other analyses offer a different explanation, however, including John Ferejohn, who showed that voters became less loyal to parties during this era, instead turning to incumbency to decide their vote (Jacobson and Carson 12). By the 1980s, the incumbency advantage was at an all-time high. However, competition revived in the 1990s. Carson and Jacobson attribute this partially to the decline of political machines throughout the progressive era. Since political machines protect challengers by protecting them with jobs and other perks in the event they lose, the decline of those also declined the percentage of strong challengers (18).figure 3.5 in the reading supports this point as it shows this decline over recent decades. As a result, we have actually seen a steady decline in incumbency advantage in the 21st century.

Finally, this brings us to more recent congressional elections, where experienced challengers have been able to win against incumbents more frequently. Some even argue that the incumbency advantage is going away all together! Towards the end of the Carson and Jacobson chapter, this decrease is directly connected to the rise in campaign spending in recent years. In fact, figure 3.6 shows a massive spike in spending of challengers between 2016 and 2018. The result was democrats taking back the house through many successful campaigns. It is becoming clear that in order for challengers to stand a chance of victory, they need to raise a lot of money--much more than the incumbent. This mirrors our increasingly polarized and partisan society, where now partisanship is playing a larger role in the way people vote. In order to convince people, millions of dollars must be spent on political advertising. I am seeing this now in the Montana senate race, where Bullock (the challenger) is breaking fundraising records by a huge margin. And indeed, his polling numbers have improved and he is now at a slight advantage over incumbent Daines!

As we near election day, it is becoming increasingly clear that we are in an era where challengers can stand a good chance of victory--if they have the money. This was not always the case, as the ability to raise enormous amounts of money is a relatively new phenomenon. In measuring incumbency advantage, then, one must also consider other political factors going on that cause it to ebb and flow. Right now, I think it is interesting to put into the context of the debate around fundraising. Is limiting campaign spending really a good idea when we are seeing evidence that challengers stand a much better chance of winning if they are able to raise and spend more money? Or, are we over stating the role of money and instead it is our incredibly polarized system that is incentivizing new challengers to run successful campaigns? These are all questions that will be fascinating to analyze once we see what happens in November.

One might argue that Trump won the Republican primary because so many voters were frustrated and suffering economically. Would that be an accurate statement, as reflected in the data from the authors of *Identity Crisis*? Explain.

The biggest point made in *Identity Crisis* is exactly the opposite of this argument. In fact, the biggest point is in the very title of the book--that Trump was able to appeal to the grievances of white voters in terms of how they felt about race-related issues more so than their economic anxiety. Thus, this is not an accurate statement based on the arguments carefully articulated and backed by data in the book.

In the first few chapters of the book, the authors talk about how the Obama era set the stage for a nation bitterly divided on the basis of race. In fact, once Obama took office, the republican party became more aligned with racialized politics. For example, the graphs on pages 28-29 clearly show how in every issue from attributing racial inequality to discrimination vs lack of effort to rating muslims favorably vs unfavorably diverged along partisan lines since 2008 (28-29). Thus, when the election cycle began without an incumbent in 2016, the stage was set for a race based on identity politics and the core of what it means to be a white American versus an American of color. The Democratic party was becoming increasingly liberal on racial issues and reform, while the Republicsn party was becoming increasingly conservative on the same issues, such as immigration.

Chapter 5 is where the root of the argument comes into play, discussing how Trump resonated most broadly with Republicans who were dissatisfied with the cultural direction of America. In terms of the economy, Trump really just said whatever he thought would satisfy voters, independent of how he would actually achieve that. He resonated with lower-income whites by espousing his desire to protect Medicare and Medicaid, while he resonated with higher-income whites by saying he would keep business in America, often contradicting himself in terms of economic reform to serve whatever audience he was speaking to. Indeed, on page 92 the authors lay out how in the VOTER survey there was a weak relationship between economic anxiety and Trump supporters compared to other identity based issues. Trump’s entire campaign was based on issues of race--he came out of nowhere and was able to grab the attention of those who felt their voices had been overshadowed by an increasingly urban and diverse America. His appeal to rural, working class whites, regardless of economic status, was what got him the nomination. The author’s also point out that it was not actual economic status that mattered as much as perceived economic anxiety. What this means is that it was more important that rural whites felt like their economic status was being *threatened* by an increasingly diverse nation rather than their income actually suffering in the present day. Of course, Trump did appeal to many poor, working class whites, but he also appealed to a much broader range of income levels.

Thus, it can be said that Trump was able to swing many voters in his favor based on many single issue voters, most of which were related to identity. Whether it was a fear of “racial minorities” taking over the country, a fear of immigration, or a fear of losing health insurance, Trump was able to gain votes across all income levels, most of whom were white. Of course, many of his promises did not play out in the last four years, as Trump has rolled back Obama-era healthcare reform, given wealthy individuals tax breaks, and has had his own financial disarray revealed. Perhaps then, the argument now applies to Biden, as people will vote for him since they feel more frustrated after 4 years of Trump than before!

**Work Cited:**

* *Identity Crisis*
* The politics of Congressional Elections, chapter 3, Jacobson and Carson, 2020
* Campaigns and Elections, Chapter 4
* Various points made in 538 articles I’ve read throughout the course but don’t remember exactly which ones