

Extension of Remarks



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The Decline in Competition in House Elections: Another Perspective

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It is widely argued that House elections have become less competitive since the 1940s. Ever since Mayhew called attention to a decline in “marginal” seats during the 1960s (1974), there has been concern about the ability of candidates, and particularly incumbents, to boost their vote proportions and increase their ability to win elections (Jacobson, 2004: 26-31). This has led to a corresponding concern about the ability of House members to insulate themselves from public opinion and worry about the value of House elections as a vehicle to create responsiveness in democracy (Burnham, 1975).

The basis for these anxieties is the empirical record of House election outcomes since the 1940s. The conclusion has been that since the 1940s there has been an increase in the average percentage of the vote received by incumbents and a higher percentage of seats outcomes in which the winner receives more than 60 percent of the vote (Jacobson, 2004: 26-31).

While there appears to be a consensus that these trends occurred, such that the focus can shift to what candidates are doing to create the trends, there are reasons to reconsider the empirical evidence. Much of the conventional wisdom about the vote percentages of incumbents has been based on studies that excluded uncontested seats. The number of contests in this category has changed over time, and affected the calculation of the

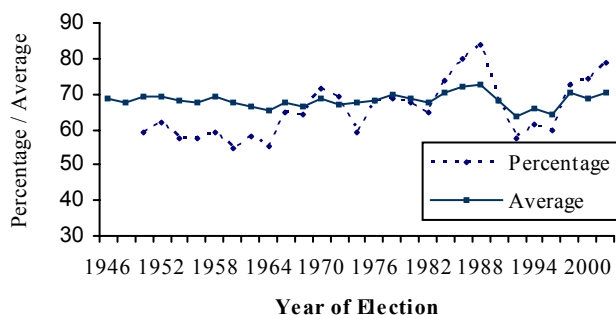
average percentage of the vote received. The number of uncontested seats was much higher in the 1950s and 1960s and then declined in subsequent decades. Excluding seats uncontested by one of the two major parties (usually won with 90 plus of the overall vote) lowers the average percentage. Uncontested seats are invariably in districts that favor one party heavily over another. When these seats that were uncontested become contested, one party still wins relatively easily. Adding in such seats to the pool of included districts raises the average, creating the impression that contests are less competitive, even though the number of uncontested seats is declining (Stonecash, 2004).

Figure 1 presents the trend in the average percentage of the vote received by winners for all House elections since 1946. Over that time it is difficult to see much of an upward trend in the average percentage of the vote received. The patterns for incumbents and all candidates are the same. While there can be disputes about what contests should be included in the calculation of this trend, there are grounds for concluding that there really hasn't been much change in the last 50 years, and the focus on how candidates can fundamentally change election results may well be displaced.

Does that mean that nothing has really changed over the last 50 years? No, but the issue is whether the focus taken has missed the

most significant political change. The other indicator of electoral change that is used to track competitiveness is the percentage of contests in which the winner or incumbent receives more than 60 percent of the vote. Figure 1 also presents this percentage since 1946. In this case it is for all contests, and it is the percentage of the total vote cast, not just the two-party vote. For this indicator, it is clear that something happened during the late 1960s, just as Mayhew noted. In 1964 55 percent of all contests were won with 60 percent of the vote or more. In 1966 that percentage jumped to 64 and has generally stayed at a higher level since then.

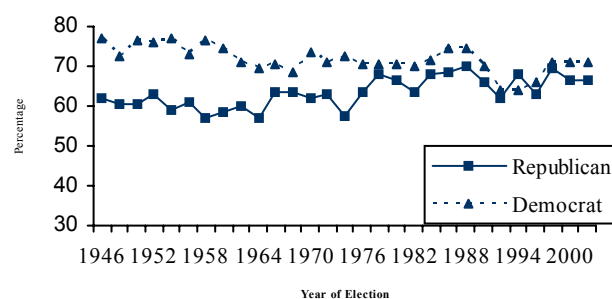
Figure 1: Closeness of House Elections: Percentage of Winners with 60 Plus Percent of the Vote and Average Vote Percentage of Winners, 1946-2002



The important matter is what this abrupt increase reflects. Again, the nature of change is not so clear. This increase has been widely interpreted as reflecting the ability of members to push the vote away from 50 percent as they seek to increase their electoral security. This trend and the specific increase in “safe” seats in 1966, however, might also be seen as reflecting a shift in partisan fortunes, if we look at the data in another way. Figures 2 and 3 present the two indicators of competition by party. Figure 2 is the average percentage of the vote received by winners from each party, while Figure 3 is the percentage, by party, of winners who received 60 percent or more of the vote.

If there is a clear trend in the average vote percentage received, it is specific to one party, or partisan in nature. Republican winners were consistently receiving a lower percentage of the vote from 1946 – 1964. In 1966 their average vote percentage increased and, except for the impact of Watergate in 1974, has stayed at a higher level since then. Democrats, in contrast, have experienced a gradual decline in their average vote percentage over time. They average 75 percent during the 1950s and have slid to roughly 70 percent in recent elections. The net effect has

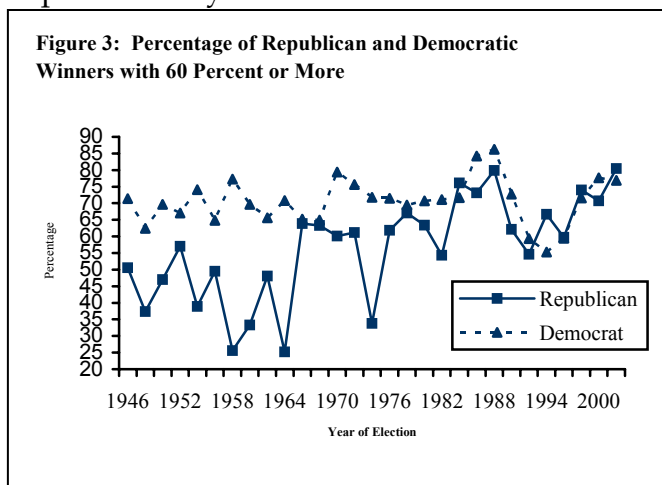
Figure 2: Average Percentage of Vote Received, Republican and Democratic Winners, 1946 - 2002



been a stable overall average.

These changes in party fortunes can also be seen in the percentage of each party’s winners who receive 60 percent or more of the vote. As Figure 3 shows, from 1946 through 1964 Republican winners were much less likely to get over 60 percent and into the safe seat category. Beginning in 1966 (again excluding 1974), Republicans made a significant increase in the percentage of “safe” seats they had. Democrats have experienced almost no change in the percentage of their seats that are safe, so all of the “vanishing marginals” have involved seats won by Republicans. The decrease in “marginals” was not a generalized phenomenon. It was not experienced by all incumbents, but by Republican candidates and incumbents (Stonecash, 2004).

Something happened in 1966 that resulted in Republicans doing better in some districts. This did not generate more seats for them, as they remained in the minority in the House for the next 30 years. But in 1994 they were able to increase their number of seats, but with lower percentages on average, and then gradually increase their vote percentages over the next several elections to match the level experienced by Democrats.



There is not space here to address the issue of long-term partisan shifts. Rather, the point of this essay is to argue that the preoccupation with explaining *the* incumbency effect (the ability of incumbents and all candidates) to move voters and increase their vote percentages has badly distracted us from more relevant and interesting questions. The incumbency effect question is not a relevant question because the effect did not occur for all incumbents or candidates. It affected Republicans, so the more relevant and interesting question for organizing the study of congressional elections is what happened during the late 1960s and 1970s such that even with the negative reactions to presidential candidate Barry Goldwater and the Watergate situation, Republicans came out of the 1970s experiencing greater electoral success. The incumbency effect studies have distracted us from focusing on partisan changes and that is where our attention should be devoted.

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