

INCUMBENCY STATUS AND VOTING IN  
U.S. CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS:  
A Longitudinal Analysis

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Abstract

Previous research demonstrated that the electoral advantage of incumbency in U.S. congressional elections has increased ever since the mid-1960s. This article offers a theoretical framework in explaining this increase in the effects of incumbency status on deviations from normal party vote in congressional elections, based upon the longitudinal analysis of survey and aggregate data.

Survey data show that the decline of party identification has in fact created new patterns of electoral behavior favoring incumbents. In addition, the incumbent has advantages over challengers in levels of visibility, familiarity, frequency of contact, and evaluations; contestants for open seats rank between incumbents and challengers on these items. An analysis of variables related to voting decisions shows that incumbents benefit from many different things that they do: advertising by congressional perquisite, credit claiming on services, as well as development of a home style that enhances their images. They also benefit from having obscure, inexperienced opponents who are usually short of resources and therefore do not become familiar to voters.

Since congressional elections are low information contests, the voting decision is reduced to a vote for, or against, change of an incumbent. Voters are likely to vote against change because the incumbent convinces them that their Congressman or Senator is doing a good job in looking after his constituency or state interests. The overall defection rates have increased at about the same pace for Senate and House elections since the late 1950s. Defections among incumbents' partisans have

stayed relatively constant, while among challengers' partisans defections have risen sharply. Except for 1974, Senate incumbents have suffered substantially higher rates of defection than their House counterparts, because of Senator's larger constituency and higher visibility, as well as strong challengers. However, the inter-chamber differences are matters of degree within a shared pattern.

In contrast to the volatility in presidential voting, voters in congressional elections seem to be shifting away from the use of party affiliation as a decision rule and toward increased utilization of incumbency status as the cue for casting their votes. Therefore, voters' favorable perception and trust of their Congressman/Senator determines their choice of the incumbent, which usually deviates from their partisanship. Thus the incumbency status has become a more important cue, and party identification a correspondingly less important cue, in congressional elections.