

# **Assessing the Rise and Development of the Inc incumbency Advantage in Congress**

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## **Abstract:**

Since the early 1970s, scholars have systematically investigated the incidence and growth of the incumbency advantage over time in Congress. Although much has been written on this subject during the past 40 years, there are still a variety of unanswered questions about the underlying causes and changes over time in the reelection rate of incumbents. We investigate the incidence of the incumbency advantage across a much wider swath of history than covered in previous work. Based on an analysis of U.S. House elections going back to the antebellum era, we find that the incumbency advantage did not suddenly emerge at some point in the twentieth century as previously believed. Rather, incumbents have always been advantaged by their position in office and the size of that advantage has fluctuated over time with changing political conditions. Our results raise new issues about democratic accountability and representation in the context of congressional elections.

Since the early 1970s, students of congressional elections have systematically investigated the incidence and growth of the incumbency advantage in Congress. In fact, more attention has been given to this subject in the congressional elections literature than just about any other topic to date. What started out as a relatively simple endeavor to identify why incumbents tend to win more often than their challengers (see, e.g., Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974a) has steadily evolved into a series of more complex arguments that typically involve what incumbents are doing well (see, e.g., Gelman and King 1999; Cox and Katz 1996) versus what challengers are doing poorly or not at all (Hinckley 1980a; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). More recently, analyses of the incumbency advantage have employed sophisticated methodological innovations (Hall and Snyder 2015) in an attempt to gain leverage on this important question. At the same time, other scholars have argued that the incumbency advantage is in decline (Jacobson 2015) or is actually a statistical artifact of the races that have been analyzed by legislative scholars (Stonecash 2008).

Although much has been written about the advantages accruing to incumbents during the past 40 years, there are still a variety of unanswered questions in the context of this important debate. For instance, we still do not have a firm understanding of the underlying factors that have contributed to the greater reelection rate for incumbents. Is it a function of advantages that naturally accrue to legislators (i.e., casework, position-taking or credit claiming) or can it be better explained by shortcomings of the challengers (limited resources or inexperience) that incumbents usually face? Moreover, what factors contributed to the growth of the incumbency advantage during the latter half of the twentieth century? Furthermore, why have we begun to see a decline in the rates of incumbent reelection in recent elections?

In order to examine these questions in greater detail, we investigate the incidence of the incumbency advantage across a much wider swath of history than covered in previous work. In

particular, we extend our analysis of U.S. House elections as far back as 1840 in an attempt to gain additional leverage on this topic. Based on our analyses of a broader subset of elections, we find that the incumbency advantage did not suddenly emerge midway through the twentieth century as previously believed. Rather, incumbents have always been advantaged by their position in office and the size of that advantage has fluctuated over time with changing political conditions. Our results raise important new issues about democratic accountability and representation in the context of congressional elections.

The organization of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we briefly review some of the most influential theoretical literature on the incumbency advantage in Congress. From there, we describe our data collection process and the resulting data set of House elections between 1840 and 2014. We then offer a descriptive account of some general trends of interest, such as the proportion of incumbents reelected to the House, before delving in to a more sophisticated empirical analysis. This includes estimating the Gelman-King measure of the incumbency advantage, the Cox and Katz direct, indirect, and overall measure of incumbency, as well as the Erikson and Titiunik regression discontinuity approach to estimating the personal incumbency advantage. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our main findings and the implications they have for our understanding of the incumbency advantage as well as future studies of this phenomenon.

## **The Incumbency Advantage in Congress**

Students of elections as well as casual observers of American politics routinely witness incumbent members of the national legislature regularly retain their positions irrespective of a variety of factors. In fact, it would seem that members often win reelection in spite of these

extenuating circumstances. Even when faced with low institutional approval, a seeming inability to enact meaningful legislation, and strong partisan tides, it is not uncommon for Americans to return approximately 90 percent of representatives to their offices in DC. This phenomenon, known as the incumbency advantage, has arguably spurred more discussion within the literature on congressional elections than any other.

Numerous works began investigating the possible advantages of incumbency as far back as the early 1970s (see, e.g., Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974b; Ferejohn 1977; Cover 1977; Fiorina 1977). From there, scholars began to try to identify the factors responsible for cultivating this phenomenon. These explanations ranged from institutional features such as legislative casework (Fiorina 1977), legislative activism (Johannes and McAdams 1981), advertising (Cover and Brumberg 1982), replacement among members (Born 1979; Alford and Hibbing 1981), and redistricting (Erikson 1972; Cover 1977).<sup>1</sup> Others argued that behavioral explanations were more appropriate. For example, some believe that the advantage can be explained by legislators' personal home styles in their districts (Fenno 1978), rational entry and exit decisions by strategic candidates (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Krasno 1994, Cox and Katz 1996), a growing 'personal' vote (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), and a greater emphasis on television appearances in a candidate-centered electoral era (Prior 2007).<sup>2</sup> Still other works place a greater emphasis on the role of donations and money. Both House and Senate campaigns have grown in cost over time (Abramowitz 1989, 1991) with a disproportionate amount of that money being raised and spent by incumbents (i.e., the "strategic money" thesis as discussed by Jacobson and Kernell 1981; see also Herrnson 2012). Furthermore, Box-Steffensmeier (1996) demonstrates that incumbents do

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<sup>1</sup> Critics of congressional redistricting as a possible explanation for the incumbency advantage quickly pointed out that since incumbent senators were also reelected at very high rates, redistricting could not be a contributing factor given that state boundaries do not change every ten years. On this point, see especially Tufte (1973).

<sup>2</sup> See also Jacobson (1987) for a discussion suggesting that incumbents are no safer than they had been in the past. For a critique of this argument, see Bauer and Hibbing (1989) and Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina (1992).

not necessarily have to outspend their opponents, but instead can simply ward off potentially strong challengers by amassing large war chests, therefore increasing their chances of success.

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars seeking to account for the incumbency advantage began to develop more rigorous measures to gain leverage on the question at hand. In their important work in this vein, Gelman and King (1990) rigorously demonstrate that common measures of this phenomenon (the sophomore surge or retirement slump, for example) produce biased and/or inconsistent estimates of the advantage.<sup>3</sup> They therefore correct for these inherent problems and subsequently discover a vote-denominated incumbency advantage as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as a large increase in the advantage accruing to incumbents in the mid-1960s.

Cox and Katz (1996) extend the Gelman-King measure in an attempt to re-examine why the incumbency advantage grew so sharply in the mid-1960s. In particular, Cox and Katz 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 in subsequent elections. They break the indirect effect 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 entering the race. Cox and Katz posit that the dramatic growth in the incumbency advantage was a product of an increase in the quality effect and suggest that future scholars dedicate their research to understanding why the quality effect increased over time.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although Erikson (1971) was among the first to note 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) formally demonstrated the nature of this bias in their work.

<sup>4</sup> For an alternative explanation for the increase in the incumbency advantage, see Levitt and Wolfram (1997).

In a similar vein, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) offer additional insights into the sources of the advantage that incumbents enjoy. Specifically, they utilize an experimental approach to compare vote percentages in the old and new portions of a representative's redrawn congressional district. The logic here is that the incumbency advantage stems at least in part from a personal vote, and their results suggest exactly that. Incumbents perform better in districts in which a larger proportion of their previous constituency remains within their new district. Indeed, they conclude that, on average, the personal vote comprises anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of the overall incumbency advantage. This finding was particularly striking and important given that it demonstrated a personal vote for House members before an era of television, large staffs, or the franking privilege. This finding ultimately eliminated these factors as the driving force behind the modern day growth of the incumbency advantage.

The most recent development in efforts to measure the incumbency advantage in House elections have focused on the use of the regression discontinuity design (Erikson and Titiunik n.d.; Fouirnaies and Hall 2014; Hall and Snyder n.d.; Lee 2008). Regression discontinuity exploits the “as if” random assignment of winners and losers in close elections to obtain an estimate of the electoral returns to incumbency. The key theoretical and empirical assumption in this case is that in close elections, candidates on either side of the electoral threshold will not be systematically different, save for their treatment status (Lee 2008). When this condition holds both empirically and theoretically, the regression discontinuity design is said to recover an estimate of the causal effect of incumbent status.<sup>5</sup>

Although there is an ongoing debate on whether House elections satisfy certain necessary empirical assumptions that underlie the regression discontinuity design (see, e.g., Caughey and

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<sup>5</sup> Hainmueller, Hall, and Snyder (n.d.) note that the estimates obtained through a regression discontinuity design are “local” in the sense that it “only estimates incumbency advantages for extremely close elections – technically, in fact, it only provides an estimate for hypothetical districts with exactly tied elections” (1).

Sekhon 2011; Eggers, Fowler, Hainmueller, Hall, and Snyder 2015), there is an additional consideration that must be taken into account. Most studies define incumbency in terms of the incumbent *party* (i.e. the party that won the last election) rather than the incumbent *legislator* (Erikson and Titiunik n.d., 2-3). As a result, the regression discontinuity estimates reported in most studies capture the partisan rather than the personal incumbency advantage. Erikson and Titiunik (n.d.) note that the personal incumbency advantage is the “quantity that has long been of interest to substantive scholars” (2), which points to a potential roadblock in the application of this new method in analyzing the incumbency advantage.

Nevertheless, two recent studies propose regression discontinuity approaches that have the potential to capture the personal incumbency advantage. Fowler and Hall (2014) use term limits in state legislatures as leverage to isolate the personal incumbency advantage, which is unfortunately not applicable to House elections since there are no term limits. Erikson and Titiunik (n.d.), in contrast, outline a estimation strategy that focuses on the subset of first-term incumbents who entered office by winning a close, open seat election can be used to measure the personal incumbency advantage.<sup>6</sup> Erikson and Titiunik argue that this that this subset of legislators is ideal because:

[t]he vote share in the following election reflects two changes – the officeholding premium from incumbency status (the direct personal incumbency advantage), plus any decline in challenger quality that arises from the incumbent’s deterring ability (the indirect scareoff effect). At the RD cutoff, the arbitrary winner has no net advantage due to greater candidate quality (vote appeal) or quality-induced scareoff” (4).

As such, the modeling strategy sacrifices generalizability in order to obtain an estimate of the quantity of substantive interest.

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<sup>6</sup> As before, we define close elections as those in which the winner won by no more than 5 percentage points.

While the bulk of research on the incumbency advantage focuses on the period from the 1960s onward, prior research suggests there is actually evidence of an incumbency advantage in earlier periods. Garand and Gross (1984) and Gross and Garand (1984) both report evidence of an upward trend in incumbent electoral security as far back as the 1890s. More intriguingly, Garand and Gross (1984) find that ``[i]ncumbent winners have always done better than non-incumbent winners'' (29), but the magnitude of the incumbent advantage, as captured by vote margins, began to increase in the 1890s. More recent studies have reported more direct estimates of the incumbency advantage from the 1870s to the mid-twentieth century. Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts (2007) and Carson and Roberts (2013) employ the Cox-Katz measure to estimate the incumbency advantage in these historical elections. Although they find that the incumbency advantage was lower in this period, both studies uncover evidence of an incumbency advantage as far back as the 1870s. In particular, they find that the indirect effect was always positive while the direct effect was mostly positive, but was occasionally negative. As such, these results buttress Cox and Katz's (1996) assertion about the importance of the indirect component of the incumbency advantage.

Other recent work has further demonstrated that the advantages accruing to incumbents can ebb and flow over time. Most notably, Jacobson (2015) illustrates that current members of Congress are less advantaged than those who ran in races between 1960 and 2010. Given the increasing nationalization of politics, Jacobson argues that those incumbents seeking office today enjoy no more of an advantage than their counterparts running in the 1950s. This finding leads us to question whether or not the higher levels of the incumbency advantage between the 1960s and early 2000s are anomalous to a larger time frame. Mapping this trend and assessing the most appropriate means by which to evaluate it are the focus of the remainder of our paper.

## Historical Elections Data

For the analysis in this paper, we needed to identify two key pieces of information for each congressional election from 1840 to 2014, which is the broader era we analyze. While data from the modern era is readily available, obtaining the 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 if the race included an incumbent or was an open seat contest.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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 well as geographic boundaries. Some states used multimember 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.<sup>8</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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 primary opposition candidate.<sup>9</sup> 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 (Cox and Katz 1996), it was also necessary to collect data on candidates' political backgrounds. Unlike data on election returns, information about candidate's backgrounds, particularly from earlier time periods, required far more time and effort to collect. Our data on candidate quality in congressional elections from 1946 to 2010 comes from Jacobson (2013). We then updated the dataset to include candidate information for the 2012 and 2014 elections. In order to gather as much data on candidates' backgrounds for the period from 1840 to 1944, we utilized 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 Congress.<sup>10</sup> Since there was more legislative turnover throughout the nineteenth century (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 that did not serve in Congress, we first turned to "The Political Graveyard's" website,<sup>11</sup> which provides background information on politicians (in addition to where they are buried). Additional background information was collected from the *New York Times* Historical Index and *Google*<sup>TM</sup>.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> During 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 be 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.

<sup>10</sup> This biographical directory is available online at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>.

<sup>11</sup> The Political Graveyard web site can be accessed at <http://www.politicalgraveyard.com>.

<sup>12</sup> We were able to collect background data on just over 75 percent 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.

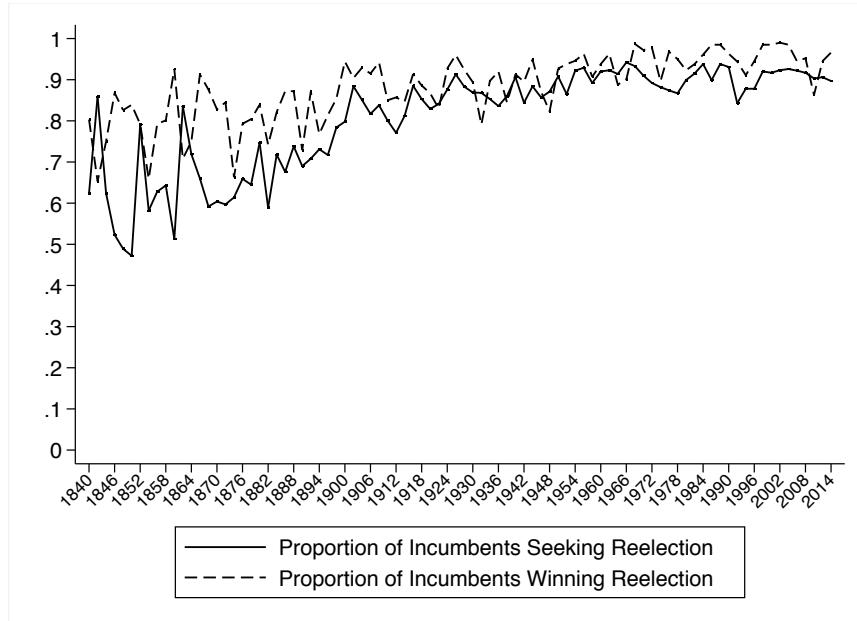
Once we compiled background information on each candidate, we followed Jacobson's (1989) approach and measured candidate quality as whether or not a candidate currently holds or has previously held elective office. Although some studies advocate for more nuanced measures, we chose to utilize the simple 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 sophisticated measures (Jacobson 2013). 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 utilize, or are extensions of, this dichotomous measure.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Before we present the various estimates of the incumbency advantage over the period from 1840 to 2014, we believe it can be informative to first examine some general patterns of electoral competition. Observers of American politics regularly bemoan the high levels at which incumbent members of Congress are reelected to their posts. The seemingly ever-increasing levels of polarization and the dramatic rise in the quantity and importance of money in elections are only two facets that have been identified as potential culprits. However, Figure 1 demonstrates that the high rates of incumbent electoral success are not a recent development. The solid line depicts the proportion of incumbents deciding to run for reelection from 1840 to 2014. These numbers are considerably lower in the first six decades of the time series, but reached levels comparable to the modern age around the turn of the century. The 1848 and 1850 elections are the only two instances in which less than half of incumbents sought reelection. Also, less than 55 percent of incumbents ran again in 1846 and 1860, but these are the only four

years with such high turnover. Though the House was welcoming larger numbers of freshman during this time, the modal election still featured an incumbent candidate. Since 1900, an average of 88.5 percent of incumbents were seeking another term in office, with over 90 percent running again in 23 election cycles.

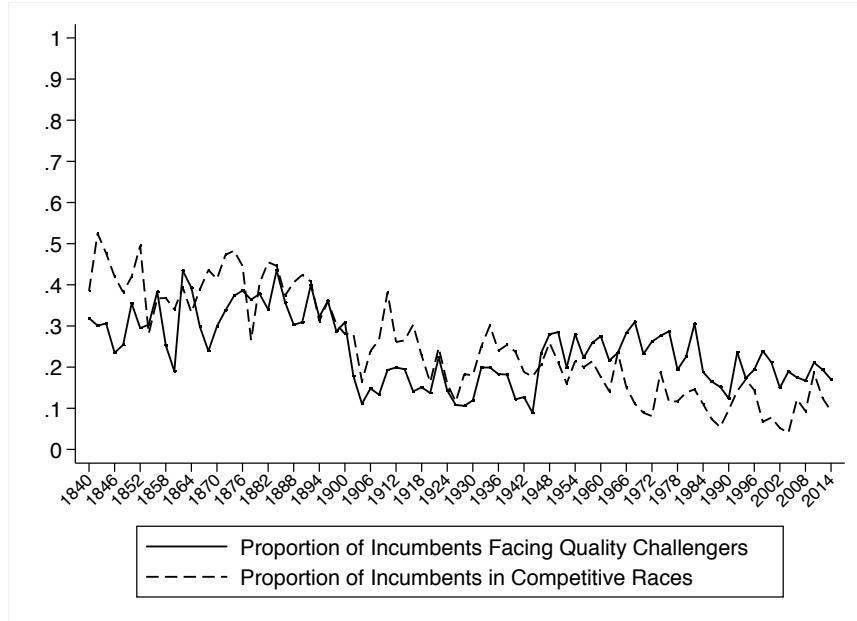
**Figure 1:** Proportion of Incumbents Seeking and Winning Reelection, 1840-2014



However, this difference across time is less pronounced as reflected by the dotted line. These numbers represent the proportion of incumbents who successfully won reelection over the entire time series. In the 88 election cycles for which we have data, only 6 bore witness to fewer than 75 percent of incumbents maintaining their seat in the House of Representatives. The least successful year for incumbents came in 1842 when only 65 percent of those seeking reelection accomplished their goal. For all races between 1840 and 2014, almost 90 percent of all House members seeking reelection managed to do so. This demonstrates that an incumbency advantage has existed prior to record high polarization, record levels of fundraising and spending, technological advances such as radio and television, or even the rise of candidate-centered races.

Shifting our attention to Figure 2, the solid line plots the proportion of incumbents who faced quality challengers. Here a quality challenger is defined as any candidate who previously held an elected position. Prior to the 1880s, almost one-third of all incumbents were pitted against quality challengers. But those numbers began to decline steadily, averaging little more than 20 percent since 1890 and less than 20 percent since 2000. This trend has been met with a similar decline in the number of competitive races. We define a competitive race as one in which the winner received less than 55 percent of the vote. Roughly 40 percent of all races were classified as competitive prior to 1890, while a mere 10 percent of races since 2000 have been dubbed as such. Again, these trends track relatively well as the averages correlate at 0.59.

**Figure 2:** Proportion of Incumbents in Competitive Races and Facing a Quality Challenger, 1840-2014



### *Regression-Based Estimates of the Inc incumbency Advantage*

As noted above, the development of regression-based techniques represent an important advancement in analyzing the incumbency advantage in congressional elections. Gelman and King (1990) were the first to employ regression models in an attempt to develop an unbiased and efficient estimator of the incumbency advantage. While a detailed discussion of their empirical and theoretical argument is beyond the scope of this paper, we do want to briefly review their regression model. The outcome variable is the Democratic share of the two-party vote (Dem. Vote<sub>it</sub>) in the current election. The key predictor captures the incumbency status (Incumbent<sub>it</sub>) in a given race and is coded 1 if a Democratic incumbent runs for reelection, 0 if no incumbent runs, and -1 if a non-Democratic incumbent runs. Gelman and King's regression model includes two additional control variables. The first control is the lagged Democratic share of the two-party vote (Dem. Vote<sub>it-1</sub>). The final control is an indicator variable (Party<sub>it</sub>) that accounts for which party won the election in a given district. It is coded 1 if the Democratic candidate wins the election and -1 if the non-Democratic candidate wins.

$$\text{Dem. Vote}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{ Party}_{it} + \theta \text{ Incumbent}_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Since our interest is the change in the incumbency advantage over time, we estimate the above stated model for each election year. We also follow King and Gelman's approach and do not estimate the model for the election immediately following the decennial reapportionment.<sup>13</sup> For each election year, the coefficient for  $\theta$  represents the advantage of having an incumbent candidate contest an election. In Figure 3, the black dot represents the coefficient estimate for

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<sup>13</sup> The one exception to this rule is the 1920s because Congress failed to pass a reapportionment bill during this decade (Eagles 1990). As such, we include the 1922 election in our analysis.

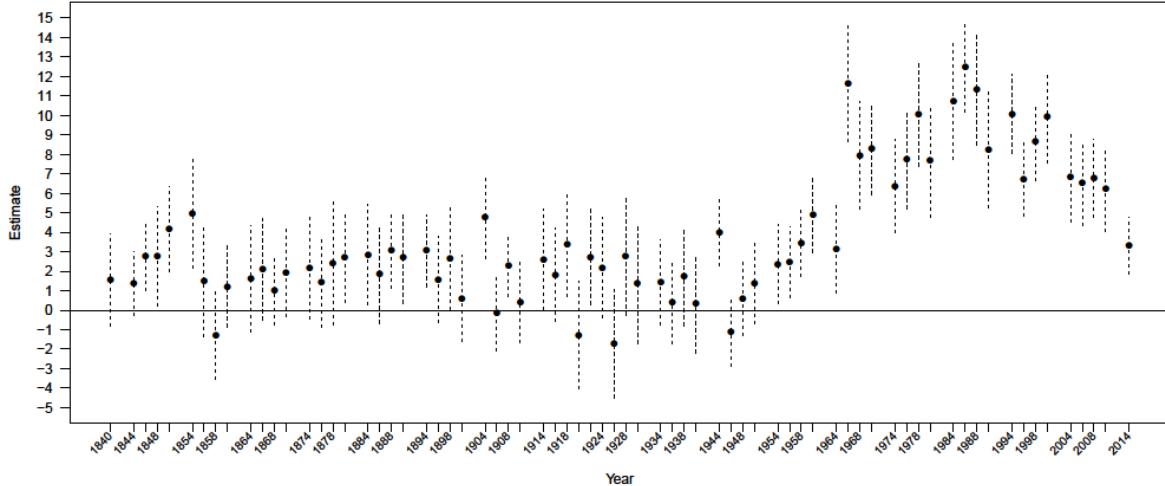
each election year while the dashed line denotes the 95% confidence interval.<sup>14</sup> As with other studies, our estimates capture the dramatic increase in the incumbency advantage in the 1960s. In the 1950s, the incumbency advantage was never greater than four percentage points, but the estimate is more than double that in most elections in the 1960s through 1990s. The results in Figure 3 also capture the recent decline in the incumbency advantage throughout the last decade of elections (see Jacobson 2015).

Of more immediate interest for our purposes, however, are the estimates for the period before 1900, which is the first year examined by Gelman and King (1990). Contrary to the expectations of some prior research that views the incumbency advantage as a strictly modern phenomenon, we find evidence of an incumbency advantage as far back as the 1840s. In the elections from 1846 to 1854, the incumbency advantage was anywhere from 2.8 to 5 percentage points. Indeed, the estimates for the 1850 and 1854 elections are larger than the estimates for elections in the 1950s, early 1960s, and the recent 2014 election. We also find evidence of a statistically significant incumbency advantage in a number of the elections in the 1880s and 1890s. Furthermore, the estimates throughout the historical period are often higher than those in the 1900s through 1920s, which is important since this period marks the beginning of more candidate-centered election campaigns (Reynolds 2006; Ware 2002). In sum, the estimates from historical elections reveal a statistically and substantively meaningful incumbency advantage in at least two separate time periods.

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<sup>14</sup> Our conclusions remain largely the same if we instead use a one-tailed test to determine statistical significance. The following are the only years for which a one-tailed test would lead us to reject the null hypothesis when we failed to do so with a two-tailed test: 1844, 1870, 1924, and 1928.

**Figure 3: Gelman-King Measure, 1840-2014**



As discussed earlier, Cox and Katz (1996) offered an extension of the basic model outlined by King and Gelman (1990). In order to model both the direct and indirect components, Cox and Katz outline 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 and 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 measures control 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  $\theta$  captures the direct effect of incumbency and the estimate for  $\sigma$  denotes the “quality” effect.

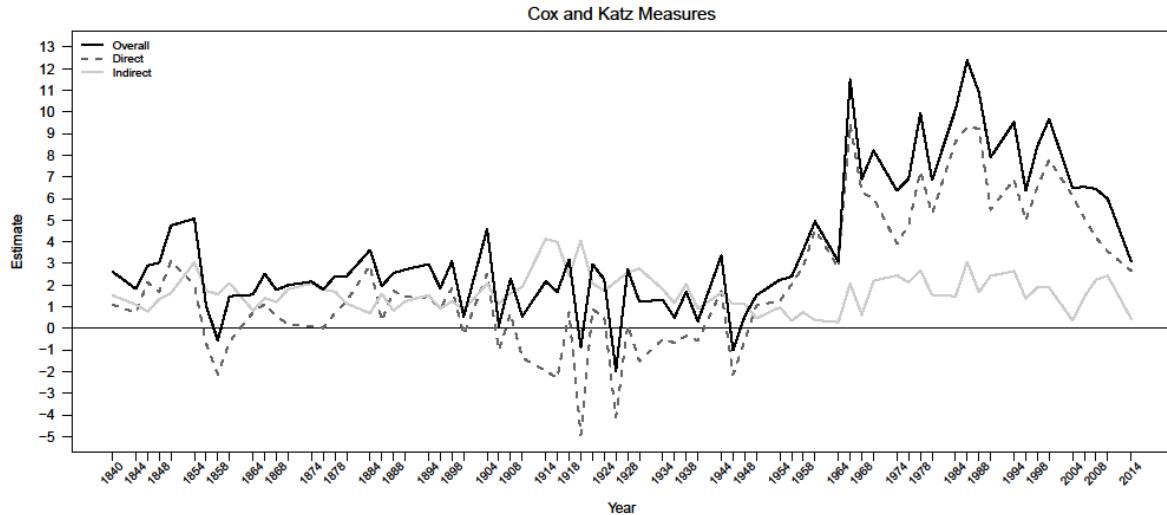
$$\text{Dem. Vote}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{ Party}_{it} + \theta \text{ Incumbent}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{ Incumbent}_{it-1} + \sigma DQA_{it} + \beta_5 DQA_{it-1} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{DQA}_{it} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{ Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \gamma_2 \text{ Party}_{it} + \delta \text{ Incumbent}_{it} + \\ \gamma_3 \text{ Incumbent}_{it-1} + \gamma_5 \text{ DQA}_{it-1} + \epsilon_{it} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

In the second regression model, the outcome variable,  $\text{DQA}_{it}$ , 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 effect ( $\theta + \sigma\delta$ ). In Figure 4, we report the direct, indirect, and overall incumbency advantage for each election year in our time series. As with the Gelman and King measure, we exclude the first election immediately following the decennial reapportionment.

There are a number of interesting patterns evident in Figure 4. First, Cox and Katz’s measure of the overall incumbency advantage largely follows the same pattern as the Gelman-King measure throughout the entire time period. There is a noticeable jump that occurs in the late 1960s and is followed by a downturn in the 1990s and has continued in recent elections. Similarly, the overall incumbency advantage in the 1840s and 1850s is comparable to the 1950s, early 1960s, and elections over the last decade. Furthermore, the overall incumbency advantage is consistently positive and relatively stable from the 1860s through the early 1890s before dropping off and becoming more variable throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

**Figure 4:** Cox and Katz Incumbency Advantage Estimate, 1840-2014



Second, the overall incumbency advantage appears to be driven by different forces across the time period we examine. Since 1950, it is rare for the indirect effect to account for more than 30 percent of the overall incumbency advantage. Of the 26 elections we examine from 1950 to 2014, there were only seven elections in which the indirect component accounts for over 30 percent of the overall incumbency advantage. These findings are consistent with the results from recent studies that argue for a limited role of the scare off effect (Hall and Snyder n.d., Imai et. al 2011). In contrast, the indirect effect accounts for a far more sizable share of the overall incumbency advantage throughout the rest of the time period. From 1840 to 1948, there are only two elections in which the indirect effect accounts for less than 30 percent of the overall incumbency advantage.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in 10 of the 18 elections we examine from 1900 to 1940, the overall incumbency advantage only takes a positive value because of the size of the indirect effect.

<sup>15</sup> There were four elections between 1840 and 1948 in which the overall incumbency advantage was negative: 1858, 1920, 1920, and 1946. In contrast, the indirect effect takes a positive value for all election years. In these four cases, we are not able to calculate the proportion of the incumbency advantage due to the indirect effect because the resulting quantity is not substantively meaningful (Cox and Katz 1996).

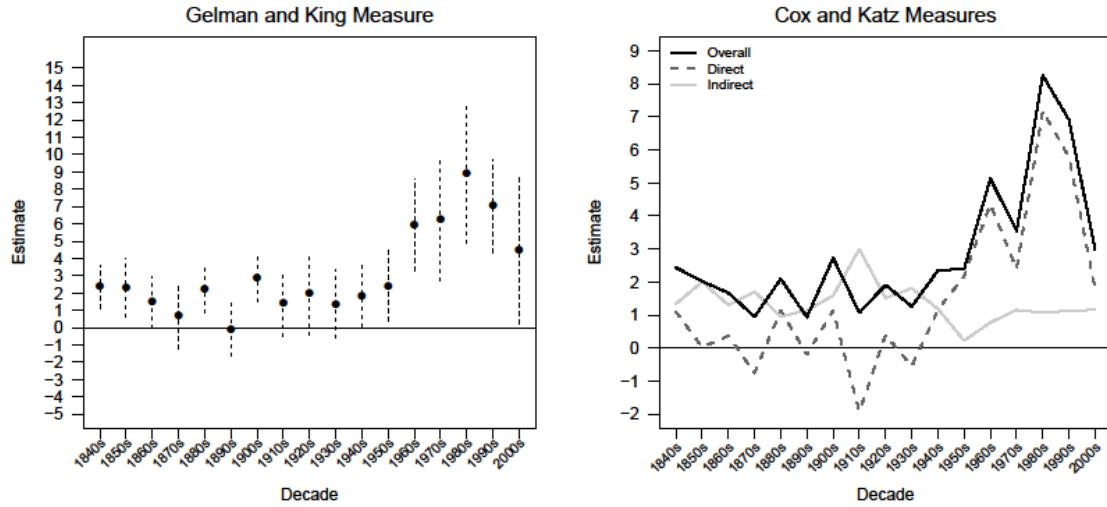
As a robustness check on the results reported above, we re-estimated both the Gelman-King measure and the Cox-Katz measure for the subset of competitive districts. We define competitive districts as those in which the previous election was decided by no more than five percentage points. Our approach is analogous to the one adopted in other studies to identify “close” elections (Fowler and Hall 2014; Hall and Snyder n.d.; Lee 2008). Rather than estimating the model for each election year, however, we pooled all elections between decennial reapportionments to ensure that we had a more sizable sample.<sup>16</sup> As such, each “decade” corresponds to the four elections immediately following reapportionment, but before the next round of apportionment. For example, our model for the 1840s would include all competitive congressional races in the 1844, 1846, 1848, and 1850 elections.

The first panel of Figure 5 plots the estimates for the Gelman-King measure by decade. Despite focusing on a smaller set of elections, the results suggest a similar trend to the one reported in Figure 3. First, there is a clear jump in the estimated incumbency advantage in the 1960s that peaks in the 1980s at 8.9 percentage points, but has dropped to 4.5 percentage points in the last decade. Second, there is consistent evidence of an incumbency advantage in competitive districts throughout the nineteenth century. The estimated incumbency advantage is positive and statistically significant for five of the seven decades in the period from the 1840s to the 1900s. Again, it is important to remember that we are focusing on competitive House races, which means the 2-3 percentage point advantage enjoyed by incumbents from competitive districts during this period could change the outcome in a significant number of these races.

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<sup>16</sup> We include election-year fixed effects in these models to account for any year-specific factors.

**Figure 5:** Incumbency Advantage in Competitive Districts



The second panel of Figure 5 reports the estimates for the Cox-Katz measure by decade.

While the impact of the indirect effect in historical elections was evident in Figure 4, it is even more noticeable in competitive districts. Indeed, the direct effect is rarely larger than one percentage point over the period from the 1840s to the 1930s and is never larger than the indirect effect. After this point, however, the indirect effect drops markedly while the direct effect more than doubles in subsequent decades. Although the gap between the direct and indirect components closed somewhat in the 2000s, the direct effect is anywhere from five to ten times larger from the 1940s through the 1990s. In short, the results from analyzing competitive districts offer additional support to the earlier observation that the indirect effect appears to drive the overall incumbency advantage in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while the direct effect has been the primary driver since at least the 1950s.

#### *Regression Discontinuity and the Personal Incumbency Advantage*

As noted above, most studies of the incumbency advantage that employ a regression discontinuity design estimate the partisan rather than the personal incumbency advantage. In this

portion of the analysis, we employ the regression discontinuity design proposed by Erikson and Titiunik (n.d.), which provides an estimate of the personal incumbency advantage. The outcome variable in their model is the Democratic share of the two party vote and their measure of incumbency status is analogous to the one used by Gelman and King (1990). Since our focus is limited to incumbents who won an open seat contest in the previous election, the measure of incumbency can only take the value of 1 in the case of a Democratic incumbent or -1 in the case of a non-Democratic incumbent.<sup>17</sup> Erikson and Titiunik also include the lagged Democratic vote, the district-level presidential vote, and yearly fixed effects as additional control variables.

$$\text{Dem. Vote}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Dem. Vote}_{it-1} + \beta_2 \text{ Pres. Vote}_{it} + \theta \text{ Incumbent}_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

Since this approach requires us to not only examine close elections, but also districts where the incumbent entered office via an open seat, we had to pool elections from a broader time span than in some of our previous. Specifically, we focus on five separate time periods: 1840-1888, 1890-1930, 1934-1966, 1968-1990, and 1994-2014.<sup>18</sup> As before, we exclude elections immediately after the decennial reapportionment. While Erikson and Titiunik exclude Southern states from their analysis, we report estimates for both the full set of races and for all elections in non-Southern states.

In Figure 6, we report estimates of the personal incumbency advantage for the entire time period and for each of the subsets of elections noted above. Since the estimates are largely

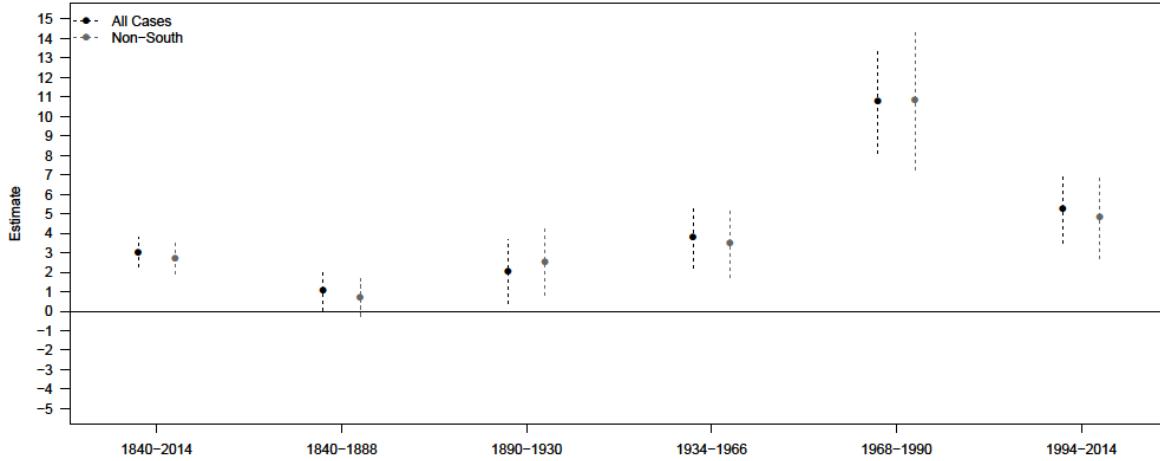
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<sup>17</sup> See Erikson and Titiunik (n.d., 5-15) for a more detailed explanation of these selection criteria and the empirical implications of this coding procedure.

<sup>18</sup> The first period includes elections that were contested with party-supplied ballots. The second period covers the period in which the secret ballot and direct primary were adopted. The third time period corresponds to the New Deal coalition. The fourth time period begins with the first election analyzed by Erikson and Titiunik (n.d.) while the final time period begins with the first election after the Republicans took control of the House after 40 plus years of Democratic control.

identical, both statistically and substantively, for estimates based on all states and the estimates for just the non-Southern states, we focus on the results for the former. For the full time period, the personal incumbency advantage is estimated to be approximately 3 percentage points. It is important to note though that the estimates for each time period follow a similar pattern to those reported in earlier analyses. We find evidence of a small personal incumbency advantage, around 1 to 2 percentage points, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The estimate reaches 3.8 percentage points in the 1930s to mid-1960s and jumps all the way to 10.8 percentage points in the late 1960s through the 1980s. We also find the same decline in the last time period as the estimate drops off by more than half to 5.3 percentage points.

**Figure 6: Personal Inc incumbency Advantage**



### Implications and 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 and explanations for the variation in the benefits of being an incumbent. Based on our analysis of the incumbency advantage over a much wider swath of history than previous analyses, several

conclusions are clear. First, the advantages accruing to incumbents did not suddenly emerge at some point in the twentieth century as previous believed. Rather, incumbents have always been advantaged by their position in office and the size of that advantage has fluctuated over time with changing political conditions. Most likely, these fluctuations are due to various electoral reforms including adoption of the Australian ballot, the demise of patronage, the new system of primary elections, and further balloting and technological changes in the twentieth century (Carson and Roberts 2013).

Second, 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 50-60 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. By extending our analysis of the incumbency advantage across time and employing a number of different measures, we find that the era that has been 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. This may also help explain why some scholars are finding a decline in the incumbency advantage in recent elections—it may not be so much of a decline as it is a return to previous levels.

Third, it appears that candidate quality has always been an important factor in explaining the advantages that incumbents possess from one election to the next. Although we are not claiming that this is the only factor driving the incumbency advantage across different eras, it does appear that it is an important factor regardless of the era under consideration. As noted in the paper, incumbents possessed a small advantage throughout much of the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries that gradually began to increase in the post-World War II era. Interestingly, that advantage has been declining during the past few decades despite the fact that congressional elections are not becoming more competitive like they once were when party machines were manufacturing much higher levels of electoral competition. It is too soon at this point to predict whether that decline will continue or if we will witness another resurgence in the incumbency advantage in the foreseeable future.

Additional work on the effects of incumbent status on electoral outcomes will need to consider the broader trends of this phenomenon as outlined in this paper. We believe that new research that seeks to understand what factors led to the increase in the incumbency advantage in the 1960s could also help explain its recent decline. Jacobson (2015) argues convincingly that increasing nationalization may be the leading cause for this effect, but analyzing comparable elections before 1950 could yield alternative explanations. Whatever the case, we look forward to engaging in this debate for many years to come.

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