

Informational Rhythms of Incumbent-Dominated Congressional Elections

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INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE AND informational asymmetries go together in campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives. It is an uncontroversial proposition that challengers do less well on Election Day in large measure because fewer citizens know who they are and because those citizens that do so know less about the challenger than the incumbent (Mann and Wolfinger 1980; Jacobson 1997b). The information voters have about candidates obviously matters. But when must the information, if it is to matter, be acquired? And how is what is learned about the challenger and the incumbent, and, not least, when it is learned in the course of a campaign, tied to what candidates actually do?

By way of an analytic strategy we shall parse a question profitably posed in quite a different context—who knew what and when? In particular, we want to explore the notion of knowledge and the rhythms of its acquisition. We will examine candidate knowledge including and beyond simple name recognition and recall. More fundamentally, we shall argue that the significance of knowledge in congressional elections hinges on when it was acquired. By applying the first rolling cross-sectional survey design to House elections, we will explore the informational dynamics of congressional campaigns.

Informational Rhythms: Arguments and Hypotheses

Our primary objective is to take seriously the dynamics of congressional campaigns. This requires exploring not only the consequences of an election campaign but also the timing of those consequences in the course of the campaign. Consider the classic studies of congressional elections. With few exceptions (Mann 1978; Abramowitz 1975), they assess what citizens know at a single point in time, usually after the campaign is over. But it is indispensable to establish when in the course of the campaign citizens learned whatever they wound up learning about the candidates.

It is indispensable because when voters learn about candidates and how much they learn about them are connected. Consider the quite different situations of two citizens who are attempting to decide whether to support the incumbent or the challenger. One of them has followed both candidates throughout the campaign; the other stumbled across the name of the challenger while preparing a practice ballot. When interviewed after the election, both voters may recall the challenger's name and appear equally informed. But the challenger had a month to make a case to the first voter and no more than a week to the second voter. The second voter ends up with the same information as the first voter but experienced the campaign quite differently. Because how much voters know about candidates tends to be tied to how long they have known about them, it is necessary to establish not only what voters know about the candidates but also when they learned what they know.

The public opinion survey we analyzed, focusing on the congressional elections in Missouri in 1994, is the first to have utilized a daily rolling cross-sectional design to study House elections. Until 1996, almost all measures of candidate knowledge in congressional elections were obtained only after the election. The 1996 National Election Study (NES) was the first to include a limited number of questions about the congressional candidates in the preelection wave. The 1996 NES has four random quarter samples, while the Missouri Election Study consists of daily random samples. Although restricted to a single state, the 1994 Missouri Election Study included respondents from all nine congressional districts, exposed to campaigns conducted at a variety of levels of intensity. Although no challenger won, a restriction that should be kept in mind in evaluating the generality of our results, a number of them put up good fights. The fine

granulation of the daily random samples, taken together with the variation in campaign intensity, offers a unique opportunity to observe how congressional campaigns, when they are actively contested, can change the informational landscape.

Informational gains, if any are realized, are our principal concern. But, supposing for argument's sake that citizens do learn about candidates in the course of a campaign, what do they learn?

Awareness of the candidates, initially, was equated with an ability to recall who was running. But it became clear quickly that knowledge comes in more than one form. As Mann and Wolfinger demonstrated (1980), many people unable to recall the names of congressional candidates can still recognize them. A gradient was apparent: recall is a more demanding test than recognition, though both are tests of knowledge.

The distinction between voters' recognition and recall of candidates' names is well established, as are the minimal levels of knowledge characteristic of ordinary citizens. However, it is worth examining an even broader range of what it means to say that voters know about congressional candidates. Merely being able to come up with the name of someone running for Congress is not a guarantee of support for that candidate. Certainly it is not a guarantee of being cognizant of the candidate's potential credentials for office.

The part that knowledge about candidates plays in the voting process and the role that campaigns play in promoting knowledge of candidates requires using more than just name recognition to measure citizens' information about the choices before them. We use an expansive conception of candidate knowledge and examine a range of measures of voters' level of candidate information. In addition to name recall and recognition of political candidates, we consider other types of candidate familiarity and the differences in the levels of these types of awareness during the campaign.

Our study aims to be distinctive by plotting, for the first time, changes in citizens' levels of knowledge about, and evaluations of, incumbents and challengers through the course of congressional campaigns. By measuring various types of knowledge about congressional candidates during the campaign, we test how much of an educational role campaigns play and how this role varies by the effort and ability of the candidates to inform citizens about their electoral choices.

Study Design

The 1994 Missouri Election Study was a daily rolling cross-sectional survey of voting-age adults in the state's nine congressional districts. The survey began sixty-three days before Election Day, from the beginning of September through the day before the election, with interviews completed every day of the week.¹ As the primary elections in Missouri were held on August 4, the timing of the study overlaps with the most intense part of the congressional campaign. An average of fourteen respondents were interviewed each day, with a total of 863 interviews completed in the eight districts with incumbent candidates. Although this number is quite low in comparison to the seventy daily interviews conducted for the 1988 Canadian Election Study (Johnston et al. 1992), general trends can be clearly observed in the data. Crucially, the daily random samples allow us to chart the dynamics of House campaigns in a far more detailed way than was possible with more limited panel data previously analyzed (Mann 1978; Jacobson 1990; Kenny and McBurnett 1992).

The Campaign Context: Strong and Weak Challengers in Missouri

Since Jacobson and Kernell's study (1983), it has been recognized that a theory of congressional voting requires a theory of campaigns. A starting point of an account of congressional elections is the quality of the challenger. How voters choose is a function of how effectively candidates campaign in order to win support. If the challenger fails to mount an effective campaign, whether due to a lack of competence or resources, then however much voters might be in favor of change, they will not rally around the challenger's standard.

Westlye (1991) has driven home the fundamental contrast in the dynamics of Senate elections depending on whether they are low or high intensity. Variations in campaign intensity matter because incumbents follow satisficing rather than optimizing strategies: how much of an effort they make in a campaign is in part a function of how much of a challenge their opponent mounts.

If incumbents rise to meet the challenge, it follows that a key parameter is the variation in the intensity of the campaigns that challengers mount. The eight incumbent members of Congress up for reelection in the state of Missouri in 1994 faced a range of challengers, from several very

weak, barely visible candidates to a few relatively well-financed, serious opponents. Although all eight of the Missouri incumbents won decisively, the range of talent they faced allows us to demonstrate some of the over-time differences in campaigning between moderately intense and barely contested races. Two of the eight incumbent-contested 1994 races in Missouri qualify as "hard-fought" according to either of Westlye's (1991, 23) coding schemes, based on the October previews in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* or the amount of money spent by the challenger relative to the incumbent. In addition, Richard Gephardt's campaign against Gary Gill, who posed "a serious challenge" (Barone and Ujifusa 1995, 777) to the then House majority leader, also exhibited aspects of a high-intensity contest; in terms of challenger spending and voters' levels of information about both candidates, it resembled a hard-fought race far more than it resembled any of the five clearly low-key races. These three moderately contested districts provide a sufficient number of cases for over-time analysis ($N = 314$) and comparisons with the five completely incumbent-dominated races ($N = 549$). Although all eight incumbents won by margins of at least 6 percent and only one was ever in danger of losing his seat in Congress, the varying quality of their opponents had a significant impact on what voters in their district knew about each candidate and apparently on the fierceness of the incumbents' campaigning. By examining differences between the effects of campaigns on various measures of candidate knowledge of these two distinct levels of intensity, we can determine when citizens become aware of the challengers, learn even more about the incumbents, and learn how this varies by the strength of the challenger.

Informational Campaign Rhythms: Findings

Campaigns can have a quite different character depending on whether they are viewed from the perspective of challenger or incumbent. We shall, accordingly, start with the challenger, beginning with issues of information and then considering the relation between familiarity and favorability.

Challengers

One of the easiest tests of candidate awareness is name recognition. Accordingly, the question we want to take as our starting point is this: How effectively do challengers use campaigns as a way of becoming known to voters?

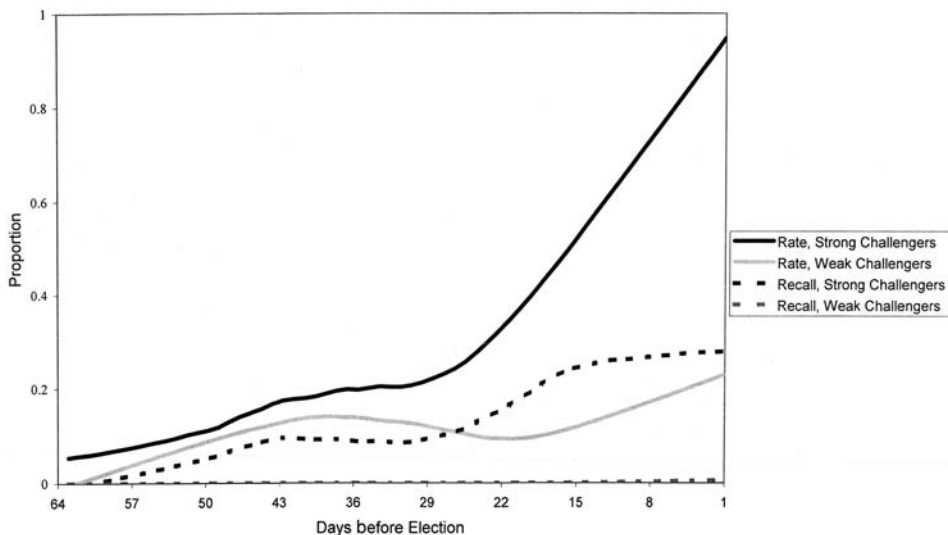


Fig. 1. Daily proportion rating (recognizing) and recalling the names of strong and weak challengers: $N = 314$ (strong challengers); $N = 548$ (weak challengers). Data smoothed using LOWESS; bandwidth = 0.5.

Since campaign effectiveness is in part a function of campaign intensity, the black lines in figure 1 represent the daily proportion² of respondents recognizing the challenger through the course of the election campaign, taking readiness to rate them on a feeling thermometer-type measure as a form of recognition.

Two points stand out. First, the campaigns of strong and weak challengers differ dramatically. It is true that weak, poorly funded candidates became somewhat more familiar to the electorate during the campaign. But what is conspicuous is the modesty of their accomplishments: even at the very end of the campaign, and even using the least strong of tests, only about one in every five respondents recognize them. Consider, by contrast, the gains that strong challengers reap in the course of a campaign. By the end of the campaign these candidates have made their presence felt. They are, by the time of the election, not universally known but very nearly so, recognized by over eight out of every ten respondents.

Campaigns, by the standard of increasing the challenger's name recognition, matter. They are the means—indeed, very likely the only means—by which a new candidate for public office can get himself or herself introduced to the public at large. Campaigns obviously do not guaran-

tee that voters will learn anything about such candidates. Being known is not an automatic by-product of taking part in a campaign. The effects of a campaign hinge, as figure 1 drives home, on how aggressively it was undertaken. Weak challengers may take part in campaigns, but they do not apparently benefit much from them. Strong challengers make use of campaigns; they are, by the end, recognized by nearly as many citizens as are incumbents.

But, and this is the second point revealed in figure 1, strong challengers make their recognition gains only in the last month of the campaign. Indeed, if the curve plotting their recognition level is scrutinized, it is only with two weeks to go that a majority of respondents recognize the challenger's name, and with only a week to go nearly a third still do not. By this standard, for roughly half of the electorate, the campaigns of even these determined challengers really only began in the penultimate week of the campaign.

And this standard of candidate knowledge is one of the most lenient possible. On more demanding measures of awareness and knowledge, voters became more familiar with the strongest challengers, but still only a minority had any familiarity beyond their ability to assign the challengers a rating. Voters continued to know practically nothing at all about the weak challengers, even by Election Day. To get a clearer picture of what citizens knew about candidates, we created a direct measure of recognition, one more difficult than the ability to assign a rating score. Respondents were asked to recognize the name of each candidate by answering what the person named was "doing that puts him/her in the news now." Only respondents knowing specifically that the individuals were candidates for the U.S. Congress were scored as recognizing their names. In contrast to the high levels of voter awareness as measured by the ability to rate candidates, on the direct measure of name recognition the three strongest challengers rose from a negligible level to only about 40 percent. The increase in this strict form of recognition is quite large, but it indicates that by the last week before the election only four out of ten people in the most contested districts could identify the challengers as House candidates when read their names. (Twice as many respondents could identify the incumbents as candidates or as their representatives.)

Name recall, the ability to remember the challenger's name when asked who was running for the U.S. House of Representatives, follows a very similar pattern to strict name recognition. The stronger challengers

make considerable gains in the last month. Even so, less than 25 percent of respondents could recall the challengers' names during the final two weeks before Election Day (see the gray lines toward the bottom of fig. 1). Since name recall is a more difficult task than either rating candidates or recognizing their names when given them (Mann and Wolfinger 1980), it is not surprising that the proportion recalling the challengers is so much lower. However, that only a quarter of all respondents could recall the names of even the most well-financed challengers in the final moments of the election suggests that these challengers were successful in getting their names at least vaguely recognized but that few potential voters were thinking very actively about them.

Another indication that information about the stronger challengers was quite limited even by the close of the campaign is the small number of people who could name either something they liked or something they disliked about these candidates. The ability of respondents to name either a like or dislike was very low throughout most of the election. The general election campaign did increase the proportion of respondents able to mention a liked or disliked quality about the candidates to about a third of the sample, but even on this combined measure it is clear that respondents had little to say, positive or negative, about even the strongest challengers.

Candidate Evaluations: The Exposure Slide

Our findings make plain that challengers, at least when they make a relatively strong effort, can become widely known, but being widely known does not translate into being well known, at least at the level of challengers we observe. The core issue, though, is whether it translates into being well regarded. Initially, it was supposed that the connection between the two is straightforward: familiarity breeds not contempt but support (Stokes and Miller 1966). Subsequently, it became evident that the connection between recognition and approval is by no means straightforward (Abramowitz 1975). But recognizing that the connection between the two is complex is not the same thing as specifying the complexities of how the two are connected. We want to take a step in this direction, by exploring how the relation between recognition and approval can be conditional on the phases of the campaign.

As we have seen, challengers are recognized by only a relative handful of citizens at the beginning of the campaign. Their necessary task is thus

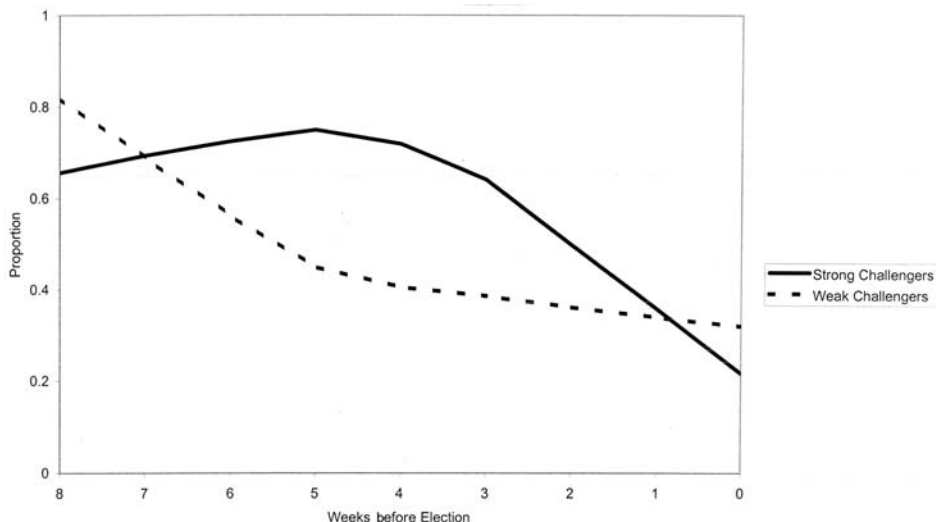


Fig. 2. Weekly proportion of favorable (6–10) ratings of strong and weak challengers: $N = 99$ (strong challengers); $N = 63$ (weak challengers). Data smoothed using LOWESS; bandwidth = 0.8.

to become known by more. But figure 2 describes the characteristic price they pay for their growing familiarity. It records the path of favorable ratings for weak and strong challengers over the course of the campaign, showing the proportion of respondents rating challengers who gave them a favorable score, plotted by week due to the small number of respondents able to rate the challengers. Both strong and weak challengers slide in popularity almost continuously during the last two months before the election. Strong challengers are able to maintain their proportionate level of support in the first month of the campaign, sliding in the second. Figure 2 thus exposes the strategic problem of challengers. They start off well regarded within their small circle—they have, after all, just won the nomination of their party. They must then make themselves known to a wider audience. But as they reach out and make their name more widely known, the proportion of those disposed to think well of them under most circumstances is fated to shrink. Hence the exposure slide—the more people recognizing the challenger, the fewer proportionately favoring him or her—recorded in figure 2.

It is obviously wrong to treat this exposure slide as though it is an inexorable dynamic. Upsetting an incumbent is an uphill fight, but challengers can win. Moreover, though they are proportionately losing support,

the challengers are not necessarily losing supporters. No doubt, particularly disastrous challengers can find their support undercut in the course of a campaign, but looking at the reported vote of respondents who gave a higher rating to the challenger than to the incumbent, we see no sign that early supporters of the challenger defected to the incumbent.

The problem that challengers face is thus not the risk of losing the supporters they have garnered but the difficulty of winning over those not initially predisposed to support them. Certainly absent special circumstances, challengers will find attracting support at an increasing rate increasingly difficult, since to keep adding to their following they increasingly are faced with converting citizens who have a reason in place to favor the incumbent. These precommitment effects do show up in our analyses but are not in truth as strong as we had initially supposed, certainly not strong enough to account for the precipitous slide of determined challengers in the second month of the campaign. Indeed, the challengers' own partisans, and not only those of the incumbents, are less favorable to the challengers as Election Day approaches.

In order to see more clearly why even determined challengers tend to run into trouble, it is helpful to remember that elections are indeed competitive contests. What happens to one candidate is almost certainly connected in some way to the actions of the other candidate. We accordingly now shall shift sides and examine the campaign from the perspective of the incumbent.

Incumbents' Campaign Effectiveness: Rising to Meet the Challenge

The strategic informational advantage of incumbents is being widely known. Incumbents, preelection polls have demonstrated, start the campaign very nearly universally recognized (Mann 1978; Jacobson 1997b). The black lines at the top of figure 3 plot, for the Missouri study, an easy form of incumbent recognition, as measured by willingness to assign a rating for incumbents through the course of the congressional campaign. Whether they are facing a strong or a weak challenger, incumbents start off the campaign known to the overwhelming majority of the public. There is a marginal increase in this type of name recognition through the course of the campaign, but given the levels of recognition at the beginning of the campaign there is clearly a ceiling effect in operation.

Incumbents' already overwhelmingly high levels of name recogni-

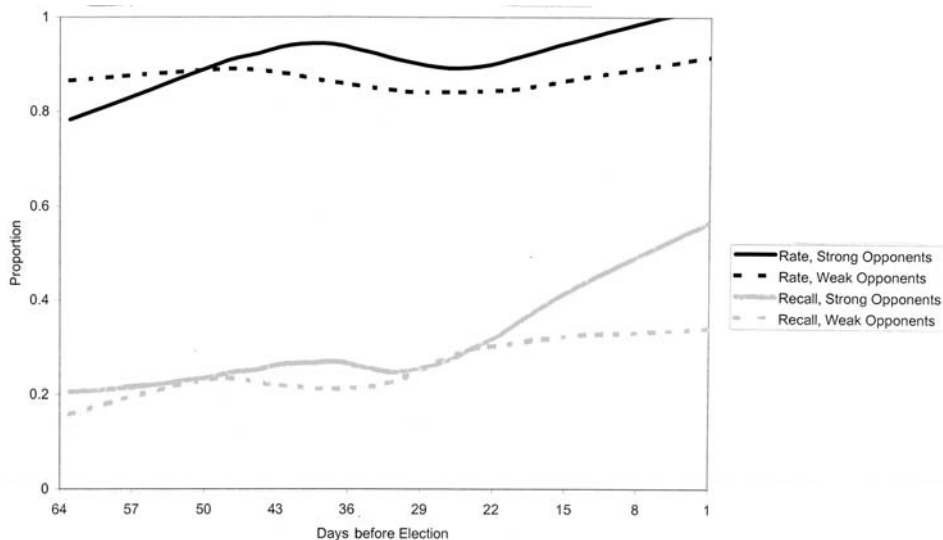


Fig. 3. Daily proportion rating and recalling the names of incumbents with strong and weak opponents: $N = 314$ (strong opponents); $N = 548$ (weak opponents). Data smoothed using LOWESS; bandwidth = 0.5.

tion at the beginning of the general election campaign naturally led some analysts to the hypothesis that, whatever advantages incumbents obtain from campaigns, informational gains were not among them (e.g., Jacobson 1981). More recent studies have clearly demonstrated that House campaigns do affect what voters know about the incumbents (Jacobson 1997a). We want, accordingly, to examine more closely this "ceiling effect" hypothesis. The impression that incumbents do not obtain informational gains from short election-year campaigns followed in part from a focus on name recognition and recall. High levels of such awareness are an important incumbent strength; they provide a necessary base to build appeals during the campaign. But the distinctive advantage of being known, we want to suggest, is that it facilitates becoming better known. Incumbents may, by taking advantage of the campaign, make their credentials better known to the public. But of course nothing is free. It requires effort and resources to become better known. It follows, on this reasoning, that incumbents are likely to make more of an effort to increase voters' knowledge about them if they have a good reason for doing so—that is, if they find themselves faced with a determined challenger.

We next examine the results of two more demanding tests of voters' awareness of their congressional representatives. First, consider the level of strict name recognition for incumbents, measured not merely by a readiness to rate the incumbent but by the ability to identify the incumbent's name as a candidate for Congress or as the current representative. The results strongly support the hypothesis that incumbents rise to the challenge. For incumbents with stronger opponents, strict name recognition rises from about 50 percent to around 80 percent of the electorate, while staying very steady for incumbents with weak challengers (data not shown). Second, consider an even more difficult task, recalling the name of the current House member (a question asked before the candidates' names were mentioned in the survey interview). Name recall of incumbents in the three most contested races increases from about 20 percent of respondents to over 50 percent by the end of the campaign (see the solid gray line in fig. 3). These significant increases in voters' awareness of incumbents suggest that even candidates with already high levels of name recognition (as shown by the black lines in fig. 3) have much to gain from campaigning, and will do so when they feel threatened by moderately serious challengers. The incumbents facing much weaker opponents did not by any means refrain from campaigning, but their levels of familiarity did not increase by anywhere near the same degree as those of the more seriously challenged officeholders. Lower levels of media coverage for these less intense campaigns might account for part of this difference.

Still more important, the over-time data demonstrates clearly that incumbents took advantage of the campaign to get across their credentials when they faced a moderately serious challenger. As one facet of the over-time record of the campaign, we explored whether the electorate could remember "anything special" the incumbent had done for the district while in office. Figure 4 plots the proportion naming such a deed through the course of the campaign, contrasting incumbents facing strong and weak opposition. The findings support the hypothesis that incumbents, when they feel the need, can use the campaign to put their credentials across. At the beginning of the most competitive campaigns, less than 30 percent of the public could identify something special the incumbent had done for the district; by the end, nearly 60 percent could do so. By contrast, incumbents facing weak challengers, though starting from the same level, had increased awareness of their service to a much smaller degree by the end of the campaign. The results in figure 4 are thus quite consistent with the hypothesis that

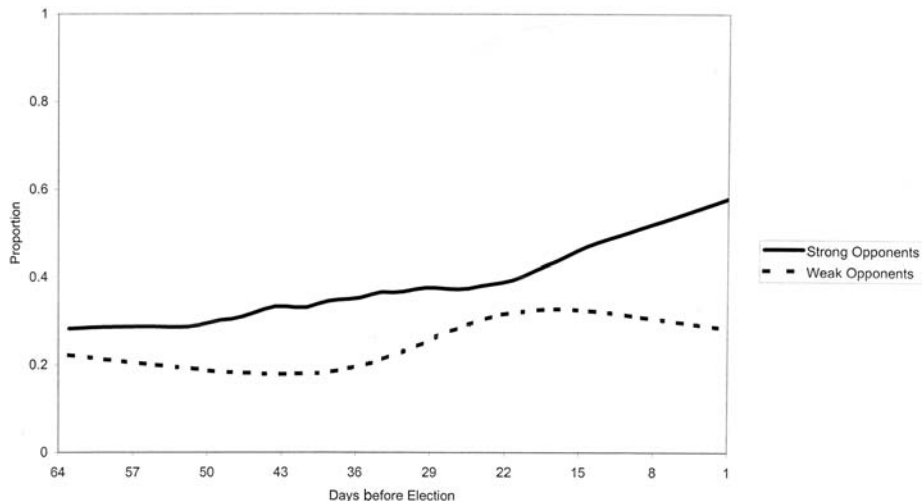


Fig. 4. Daily proportion mentioning something special the incumbent has done for district: $N = 310$ (strong opponents); $N = 525$ (weak opponents). Data smoothed using LOWESS; bandwidth = 0.5.

campaigns offer incumbents the means, if they wish to make use of it, to put their credentials across, and they are likely to exploit it precisely when they are faced with credible and well-funded opponents.

Not only were incumbents faced with moderately strong challengers able to increase the extent to which they were known, but they were also apparently able to improve the public's view of themselves and their job performance. In sharp contrast to the challengers, incumbents received a greater proportion of favorable ratings as the campaign progressed, at least those incumbents in the most intense races (see fig. 5). In addition, the average daily job approval rating for incumbents in relatively hard-fought contests increased over the last two months of the campaign. Although incumbents facing only weak challengers had higher performance ratings throughout the campaign, as we would expect, their level of job approval remained relatively consistent over time, in contrast to the gradual improvement of the incumbents in more intensely contested races. Respondents' evaluations of incumbents in the more intense races not only improved over the course of the campaign, but they also ended up at roughly the same level as the incumbents who did not attract such strong opponents.

The ability of incumbents to increase both their constituents'

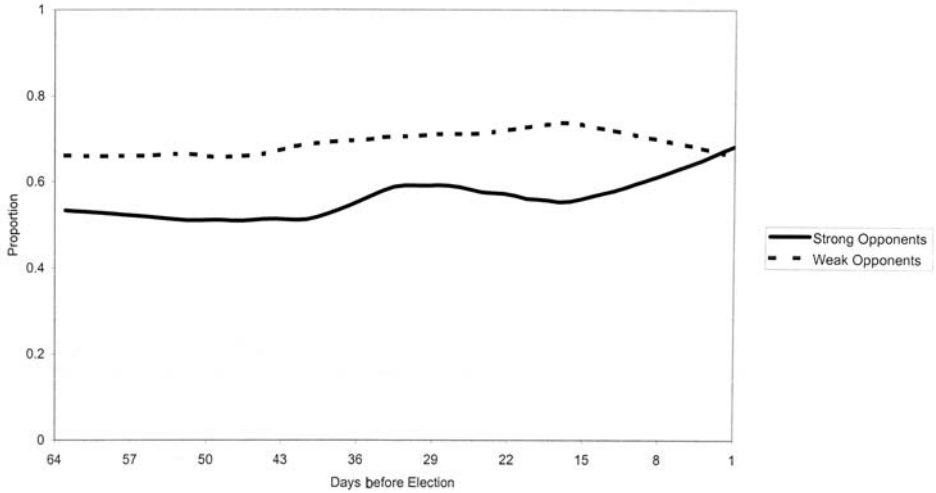


Fig. 5. Daily proportion of favorable (6–10) ratings of incumbents with strong and weak opponents: $N = 281$ (strong opponents); $N = 469$ (weak opponents). Data smoothed using LOWESS; bandwidth = 0.5.

awareness of their names and district service as well as to improve their evaluations during the final two months of the campaign demonstrates that, when they feel it is necessary, incumbents can make relatively rapid changes in how much voters know and what they think. When it may not be worth the effort, incumbents may not exert themselves enough to produce noticeable shifts so quickly or they may not receive sufficient media attention to increase their level of familiarity. Although it seems likely that varying amounts of media coverage also contribute to this trend, the fact that voters became more positive toward incumbents facing relatively strong opposition strongly suggests that the incumbents' campaign activities played a central role in these campaign shifts.

Campaign Spending

Our findings thus highlight intertwined sets of results, one set applying to challengers, the other to incumbents. Challengers, even determined challengers, slide in the standings as a wider circle of the electorate comes to know them, while incumbents, if they are facing a determined challenger, put their credentials across as Election Day approaches and become both better known and better liked. These results are intertwined because both

are products of the readiness and capacity of incumbents, when faced with determined opponents, to rise to the challenge.

Consider patterns of campaign spending. Individual districts displayed quite different patterns of incumbent and challenger spending (see table 1). For the three races with strong challengers, the incumbent-challenger spending ratio varied widely. Richard Gephardt spent just over \$2.6 million, the second highest amount in the country and over ten times what his opponent spent. In contrast, Mel Hancock was slightly outspent by his opponent, with Democratic challenger James Fossard spending nearly \$240,000 to Hancock's \$218,000.³ In the most competitive race, ninth district incumbent Harold Volkmer spent more than twice as much as his Republican opponent, Kenny Hulshof.⁴ Such considerable variations in spending patterns demonstrate the importance of the context of individual campaigns. The variations between districts also underline some of the limitations of combining candidates into general categories for analysis. We will look at campaign spending separately for each district since

TABLE 1. 1994 Missouri U.S. House Election Results and Campaign Spending

House District	Party	Candidate	1994 Vote Total (%)	Total Campaign Spending (\$)	Challenger's Spending as % of Incumbent's	Total Spending on Communications (\$)	Challenger's Spending on Communications as % of Incumbent's
Strong Challengers							
3	D (Inc)	Richard Gephardt	58	2,621,479		903,793	
	R	Gary Gill	40	196,461	7	81,003	9
7	D	James Fossard	40	239,681	110	97,782	84
	R (Inc)	Mel Hancock	57	218,098		116,108	
9	D (Inc)	Harold Volkmer	51	473,716		231,515	
	R	Kenny Hulshof	45	185,418	39	44,672	19
Weak Challengers							
1	D (Inc)	William Clay, Sr.	63	305,029		18,899	
	R	Donald Counts	33	9,461	3	2,238	12
2	D	Pat Kelly	31	135,867	18	21,294	5
	R (Inc)	James M. Talent	67	773,953		388,100	
4	D (Inc)	Ike Skelton	68	427,184		18,910	
	R	James Noland, Jr.	32	15,666	4	5,227	28
6	D (Inc)	Pat Danner	66	474,038		250,023	
	R	Tina Tucker	34	42,378	9	21,154	8
8	D	James Thomson	27	3,752	1	342	0.2
	R (Inc)	Bill Emerson	70	396,967		170,039	

Source: Barone and Ujifusa 1995; Federal Election Commission's candidate index reports and itemized candidate disbursement reports.

district-level variations were much more pronounced for campaign spending than for informational changes during the campaign.

We examined patterns of candidate spending during the final five weeks of the campaign, the period of greatest change in levels of candidate awareness. By definition, the stronger challengers had more money to spend throughout the campaign than did the weak challengers, but only one of the three strongest challengers could match the spending of the incumbent during the last five weeks of the campaign. The other two "strong" challengers were outspent many times over. However, these challengers each spent as much as all five of the weak challengers combined during the final month of the campaign. Two Democratic incumbents facing very weak challengers in heavily Democratic districts spent very little during the final weeks. In contrast, the three incumbents facing weak challengers who occupied seats in far less safe districts spent considerable sums in this period, completely burying their already underfunded opponents.⁵

But what were these candidates buying with their money in the final stretch of the campaign? Both the timing and the object of campaign spending can determine whether candidates reach voters. As Ansolabehere and Gerber have argued (1994), simply examining total campaign expenditures obscures important differences in what candidates actually spent the money on, whether on overhead costs such as office rent and staff salaries or on activities likely to increase their name recognition and support (or decrease support for their opponents) such as advertising in the mass media and other forms of voter contact. To compare the spending patterns of incumbents and challengers, we determined each candidate's expenditures on anything likely to communicate with voters, based on the itemized campaign disbursement reports they filed with the Federal Election Commission.⁶ We used a coding scheme similar to Ansolabehere and Gerber's "campaign communication spending," a combination of Fritz and Morris's "advertising" and "other campaign activity" categories, except that we included mailing expenses as part of "campaign communications" expenditures rather than keeping mailings that might have been part of fund-raising attempts separate (Fritz and Morris 1992). As can be seen from table 1, the advantages of the incumbents in total spending is matched by their spending on voter contacts. Nearly all incumbents, regardless of the strength of their opponents, dedicated much higher amounts in the final month to media, whether television, radio, or newspaper advertisements, as well as to mailings, campaign signs, and other types of self-promotion. Only the two incumbents

facing very weak challengers in safe districts did not spend over half of their total general election budget on such campaigning costs during the final five weeks. All but one of the challengers were significantly outspent overall and on campaign communications by the incumbents. Several of the challengers had very little money to spend in the first place and had little left after paying for basic overhead necessities such as office rent and telephone service. Even those with relatively large sums of money were outspent by the incumbents. Although the stronger challengers were spending the majority of their general election campaign funds during the period of time when they were becoming more widely known, so were the better-funded incumbents. All but one of the challengers were unable to spend even a third of what the incumbent was spending on reaching out to voters during the crucial final month of the campaign.

Conclusions

Congressional elections usually pit an almost universally known incumbent against a challenger, often poorly prepared and typically unfamiliar to the public as a whole. The result is foreordained or appears ominously so. Incumbents prevail and elections appear more a mechanism of coronation than of deliberation. For if elections really were a matter of deliberation, then surely their outcome should not be so predictable before the campaign even gets under way. Incumbents win the vast majority of the time, and the only question genuinely open to debate is whether the predictability of the final vote is to be understood as a consequence of the special resources that incumbency vouchsafes or as a result of characteristics of minimally informed voters that commit them to the incumbent's camp before the campaign begins or as the interaction of the two.

This notion that elections register decisions made before election campaigns even begin and that campaigns are essentially an institutionalized interlude between establishment of a candidate preference and its official expression has gained ground in recent years (Gelman and King 1993). If the outcome can be predicted before the campaign even begins, then whatever happens during the campaign hardly appears important. But this argument from predictability owes its plausibility, we think, to a confusion of contingency and agency. It is not necessary to argue that an election's outcome must in a substantial sense be a matter of chance to believe that what happened happened because the candidates—and, in the

case of congressional elections, the incumbent in particular—acted as they acted, doing what they did.

The expression of agency, obviously enough, is obscured by the standard postelection design of most previous studies of congressional elections. It is not possible to catch sight of when people pick up information in the course of a campaign, let alone what the sources of this information might be, if what they know is assessed only after it is all over. And when they learn what they learn can matter as much as what they learn—hence our concern with the informational rhythms of congressional campaigns. Determined challengers can make themselves known. Assessed by standard measures, by Election Day an overwhelming number of the electorate recognize them, as we have seen. But time defines their strategic problem. To make their case they must make their credentials known, but to manage this they must first make themselves known, and this characteristically takes them the better part of the campaign. Incumbents, because they are in the public eye from the start, have a campaign that lasts two months or more. Challengers, because they are not, characteristically are in the public eye for only the last several weeks. They have, unless they can mount an exceptional effort, enough time to become widely known but not enough to become well known. Incumbents, conversely, are both well known enough and well funded enough to make their case to voters.

There is nothing foreordained about any of these outcomes. Candidates, to be sure, must have the resources necessary to wage a competitive campaign. But they also must make the effort. Determined challengers do; weak challengers don't; and incumbents do, but much more so when faced with determined challengers. This is a story about agency, not inevitability. Incumbents characteristically start ahead and finish ahead. But it does not follow that their campaigns do not matter. On the contrary, if our findings apply generally to congressional elections, the point is precisely that incumbents do well on Election Day because they have done well during the election campaign.

APPENDIX: Wording of Items from the Missouri Election Study

Ability to Place Candidate on Scale/Candidate Rating

"Now I'll ask you about some people and ask you to rate each on a scale that runs from 1 to 10. Ratings between 1 and 5 mean that you rate that person UNFAVORABLY. Ratings between 5 and 10 mean that you rate that person FAVORABLY. You may use any number from 1 to 10. If you come

to a person whose name you don't recognize, just tell me and we'll move on to the next person."

"What about [candidate's name]? How would you rate him/her from 1 to 10?"

Strict Recognition

"Now I'm going to read you some names of people who have been in the news. Very few people know all the names, so if you don't know some, just say so. When I ask you about a person, please tell me if you recognize him or her, and if you do, why they have been in the news recently."

"What about [candidate's name]? What is [candidate's name] doing that puts him/her in the news now?"

Respondents were coded as recognizing the candidate if they knew he/she was the incumbent or a candidate for U.S. Congress.

Name Recall

"And how about the candidates who are running for Congress in your congressional district? Do you happen to remember what their names are?"

Likes and Dislikes

"Is there anything in particular that you like [DON'T like] about [candidate's name], the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives?"

Remember Something Special Incumbent Has Done

"Do you happen to remember anything special that [incumbent's name] has done for the people of this district while he/she has been in office?"

Incumbent Job Approval

"In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way [incumbent's name] is handling his/her job? Do you approve/disapprove strongly, or not strongly?"

NOTES

1. Telephone interviews were conducted every day from September 6, 1994, through November 7, 1994, with the exception of November 4, when no interviews were completed. The interviews were conducted by the Center for Advanced Social Research at the University of Missouri at Columbia.

2. All figures present LOWESS curves. LOWESS (locally weighted scatterplot smoothing) is a data smoothing procedure that reduces the distorting effect of outliers (Cleveland 1979, 1985).

3. Hancock and Fossard both probably benefited in terms of exposure from the campaign for and against Hancock II, a controversial, and ultimately unsuccessful, ballot proposition named for the incumbent.

4. In 1996 a better-funded Hulshof outspent his incumbent opponent and was able to knock Volkmer out of the seat he had held for twenty years.

5. Two of these candidates were running their first reelection campaigns after beating incumbents two years earlier (Barone and Ujifusa 1995).

6. All spending and contribution data were obtained from Federal Election Commission reports filed by the candidates. The accuracy and clarity of these reports vary by candidate.

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