

Conflicting Theories of Congressional Elections

Organization Democrats far and near acted as if they were ashamed of their own President. His name was barely mentioned in speeches and campaign literature. With an eye to the Gallup polls, which indicated a drop in Mr. Truman's popularity from a honeymoon percentage of **87** percent to an October brown of **32** percent, they decided then he was to be written off as a loss. Republicans made the most of him as an *issue*.¹

The power of the "pocketbook" issue was shown more clearly perhaps in **1958** than in any off-year election in history. On the international front, the Administration had had one of its best years. Yet, the economic dip in October was obviously uppermost in the people's minds when they went to the polls. They completely rejected the President's appeal for the election of Republicans to the House and Senate.*

The basic ideas represented by these two observations—that the popular status of the president and the state of the economy have an important influence on voters in congressional elections—have been stated more formally and given a variety of empirical tests by academic students of American elections. Two important lines of inquiry have been actively pursued during recent years. One approach treats elections as aggregate phenomena. Econometric techniques are employed to relate variations in election results nationally to aggregate measures of politically relevant conditions holding at the time of the elec-

tion. The state of the economy, variously measured by the unemployment rate, inflation rate, or real income, is the explanatory variable common to this body of research. The other approach takes the individual voter rather than the national electorate as the unit of analysis. Sample surveys are used to examine respondents' perceptions and evaluations of political conditions-including, prominently, those pertaining to the economy-and their connection to the voting decision. Despite the recent abundance, indeed surfeit, of published research using each approach, the anomaly identified in chapter 1 is no closer to resolution. Indeed, with each new study reconciliation seems more problematic.

A third popular line of inquiry, inspired by an interest in explaining why incumbent congressmen win reelection so easily, has added to the confusion. Although no one has, to our knowledge, attempted to defend or reject economic theories of voting from its perspective, this research does, by inference, offer reasons to expect national conditions to be relatively unimportant as political issues. Incumbents seem to have learned how to insulate themselves quite effectively from national political forces. After a brief review of each of these approaches to understanding congressional elections, we suggest how the findings of the "incumbency" research provide an important clue to resolving the anomalous *micro-* and *macrolevel* conclusions.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS: AGGREGATE STUDIES

With one important exception, to be examined below, the aggregate, time-series studies examine the relationship between some operational measures of the economy and the partisan division of the national congressional vote. Beginning with Gerald Kramer's seminal study in 1971,³ most of the accumulated

evidence is consistent with the notion that congressional elections are strongly influenced by economic conditions. This general conclusion does not imply the absence of important differences and disagreements between these numerous studies. Repeatedly, decisions involving thorny methodological issues have been found to affect substantive relationships. Investigators must decide which economic indices to use, whether the level of or the change in the index better represents the economy (and if the change, over what time period), whether to measure the congressional vote as a percentage of the total vote or of the two-party vote, and which time period to include. Their choices are important, for they alter the substantive conclusions supported by the research.

The diversity of approaches has its beneficial aspects, however. For one, a great deal of useful follow-up and replication research has been spawned. The enterprise almost looks like *science*.⁴ And as a second-order consequence, this unusually large volume and variety of research provides a limited form of multimethod validation of the overall finding that congressional elections are sensitive to economic conditions. Even some of the studies that wish to deny or at least depreciate the relationship contribute to this general conclusion. Stigler, for example, in arguing a negative case, presents numerous “conservative” specifications, most of which produce results supportive of the overall claim of a systematic relationship between the economy and congressional *elections*.⁵

Edward Tufte contributed another dimension to this line of research by adding a measure of popular attitudes toward the president to the standard economic *analysis*.⁶ His study makes the most persuasive case yet that the economy and national politics shape congressional elections. Tufte finds that the national division of the two-party, midterm congressional vote can be explained, statistically, as a linear, additive function of two variables, one economic and one political. Change in per capita, real disposable income over the preceding year and the president’s job-performance rating in the Gallup poll in September

together explain about 90 percent of the variance in the mid-term vote since 1938. Impressive stuff, but in chapter 6 we shall use our theory to try to improve upon his relationships.

Although, as Tufte cautions, “many different models of the underlying electorate are consistent with electoral outcomes that are collectively rational,” the fact remains that aggregate election results are no more than the sum of individual preferences. In the absence of alternative models, the reductionism from collective rationality to voter rationality is a seductive inference. Explicitly or implicitly, these studies have assumed that the economy and evaluations of the administration generate their aggregate effects directly through their standing as important issues for voters. Accepting Downs’s version of the rational, self-interested voter,⁸ Kramer, for example, assumes

that a decision rule of the following type is operative: if the performance of the incumbent party is “satisfactory” according to some simple standard, the voter votes to retain the incumbent governing party in office to enable it to continue its present policies; while if the incumbent’s performance is not “satisfactory,” the voter votes against the incumbent, to give the opposition party a chance to govern.⁹

This theory of congressional elections, which we shall call “economic voting,” is an entirely plausible representation of the electorate. Its only problem is that studies of individual voters provide so little supporting evidence.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS: INDIVIDUAL VOTERS

The aggregate-level findings-and their underlying assumptions-have directed attention to the influence of the economy on individual voting decisions. The studies published so far disagree mainly on which conceptualization of the economy is most relevant. Steven Weatherford prefaces his own analysis by

sorting out four different forms economic variables may take, any or all of which may separately shape votes: personal financial experiences and expectations; perceptions of general economic conditions; evaluations of the government's economic performance; and party images on economic policies.¹⁰

Although Kramer's assumption is so broad that any of the first three representations of the economy would be appropriate, elsewhere in his article he clearly implies that personal financial well-being is the primary concern of the rational, "self-interested" voter. Economists Francisco Arcelus and Allan H. Meltzer flatly stipulate that "rational voters are concerned with their real income and real wealth."¹¹ Moreover, throughout this research, aggregate economic variables [e.g., percent unemployed) are designed to measure direct economic effects upon individual citizens.

The difficulty with the notion that the economy influences the vote through its effect on personal finances is that it receives almost no support from studies of individual voting behavior. This is in fact one of the few consistent findings in this literature.¹² The lengths to which one must go to find such a connection is exemplified by Morris P. Fiorina's ingenious exercise aiming to show that personal economic experiences "affect more general economic performance judgements, both types of judgements feed into evaluations of presidential performance, and the more general judgements, at least, contribute to the modifications of party identification," and presidential evaluations and party identification influence the vote.¹³ But even if this elaborate construction is accepted—the plausible reverse causal sequence burdens the argument at several junctures—the effects are not large and the relationships barely reach conventional levels of statistical significance despite a large number of observations.

These same studies do produce evidence lending support to one or another of the alternative ways in which economic conditions might affect individual votes. But the reported effects are almost always rather small and the economic variables explain little additional variance in the vote once other vari-

ables are taken into account. Only voters' assessments of the relative economic competence of the two parties are regularly connected in an important way with the voting decision. And in this case, the variables are conceptually so similar that one may reasonably ask, What has been explained?

The electoral effects of voters' presidential evaluations are more consistent with aggregate research findings, although the strength of the connection varies from study to study (or from election to election). One of us (Kernell) found solid evidence that assessments of the president affect off-year congressional voters; the influence is strongest on voters who disapprove of the president's performance: negative voting.¹⁴ One reason evaluation of the president's job performance is generally more closely related to the vote than are the economic variables is that it is a summary measure of the net effect of all politically relevant conditions, including the economy. Moreover, because the president is widely recognized to be the leader of his party, presidential evaluations are conceptually similar to vote choices.

Although presidential popularity is independently associated with the vote, there is, paradoxically, little evidence that the Watergate scandal had a significant political impact on voters. Despite the conspicuous Republican disaster in 1974 (documented in chapter 1) studies of individual voters did not find much of Watergate in the individual voting decision. Using the 1974 Center for Political Studies (CPS) National Election Study, but quite different analytical techniques (normal vote and multiple regression analysis, respectively), both Miller and Glass¹⁵ and Conway and Wyckoff¹⁶ reached the same conclusion. "Watergate and the distrust in government it fostered was not the most important factor in the Democratic landslide of 1974."¹⁷ Watergate's effects were "indirect and complex" and, it should be added, very weak in both House and Senate voting decisions.¹⁸ A much smaller and more limited Wisconsin study also discovered no differences in turnout or voting decisions that could be attributed to Watergate.¹⁹

In addition to the substantive reconciliation of these findings provided by our theory, we should note that cross-sectional

survey research may mask some real direct effects of national forces on individual voting in several ways. For one, survey analysis commonly focuses upon the explanatory power of variables across individuals. It generally ignores the fact that minor individual-level relationships which work systematically in the same direction across electoral units may produce large marginal changes in the aggregate relationships over time. As Donald Kinder and Roderick Kiewiet put it,

an extremely predictable aggregate phenomenon can be produced by modest individual-level relationships. If only a subset of all voters take into account their own economic circumstances in deciding which candidate to support, for example, or if all voters do but weigh other considerations more heavily, such conditions may nevertheless translate into very strong relationships between economic conditions and political decisions in the aggregate.²⁰

Kernell aggregated the skewed effects of the presidential evaluations on congressional voting and found that a 9 percentage point change in the percent approving the president's job performance affected his party's congressional vote by 1.4 percentage points.²¹ Tufte, in the aggregate-level study described above, similarly estimated that a 9 point change in popularity produced a 1.2 percentage point impact upon his party's vote. The agreement of these estimates strongly suggests a direct effect of presidential popularity on the marginal variations in congressional voting. For the economy, however, the individual-level relationships between personal financial well-being and the vote are so puny no one, to our knowledge, has bothered to attempt to assess their potential aggregate impact.

Cross-sectional studies may also mask some effects of national forces because these are always measured with individual partisanship controlled. If a portion of the electorate shifts its party allegiance in response to economic conditions or national scandals, a single cross-sectional sample will not pick up the shift. The close connection between marginal changes in the distribution of partisans and marginal changes in the two-

party vote for House candidates makes it clear that this possibility must be taken seriously. The change in the proportion of Democratic identifiers reported in the SRC/CPS surveys from 1956 through 1978 is correlated at .67 with the change in the Democratic share of the national two-party vote.

Since we know that “leaning” partisans are as likely to change allegiance as are weak partisans,²² but are more likely to change their party affiliation between elections,²³ we have one obvious explanation for this connection. A small, but not trivial, segment of the electorate attaches itself, in response to interviewers’ questions, to the party whose candidate it intends to support. If both the vote and party choice are a response to national forces, real longitudinal effects can exist without revealing themselves in cross-sectional studies.

And last, it may simply be that the cross-sectional variance in response to variables is idiosyncratic while the cross-temporal variance—that is, between observations or surveys—is systematic. In this case a series of cross-sectional surveys may fail to detect any relationships of the variable with the vote while a regression analysis of the aggregate relationships over the same time period could produce striking results. Kramer has demonstrated that strong, underlying individual relationships may appear either nonexistent or oppositely directed in the standard cross-sectional analyses.²⁴

Panel data theoretically allow us to tap this cross-temporal relationship at the individual level of analysis. Although more work needs to be performed in this area, the existing panel studies do not suggest that this distinction between cross-temporal and cross-sectional reconciles the important substantive differences in individual- and aggregate-level research.

Fiorina’s work, mentioned earlier, uses panel data and estimation techniques which allow economic and political variables to operate through their effect on party identification as well as directly on the vote. Even so, only variables reflecting opinions of presidential performance, not those measuring assessments of national or personal economic conditions, can be interpreted as influencing the congressional vote in 1976.²⁵

Richard Brody's work with the 1972-1974 CPS panel shows that changes in the direction of party affiliation reported by some respondents were linked to their attitudes towards Nixon and to personal economic experiences. But one can calculate from the data he presents that the net effect of these variables amounts to, at most, a 2.2 percentage point shift toward the Democratic party; the actual shift was about 6 percentage points nationally, more than 5 in the panel sample. The evidence he offers from the 1956-1958 panel shows individual economic changes to have had an even smaller effect, accounting for, at most, a shift of 1.6 percentage points in favor of the Democrats in a year when the actual shift was 5.2 percentage points (4.6 in the sample).²⁶

With the partial exception of presidential job evaluations, the results of individual-level studies of congressional voting have not conformed to the assumptions or expectations arising from the aggregate studies. In particular, a good, rational, economic vote is hard to find. An undertone of disappointment is discernible in many of the reports of this research.

THE IMPACT OF INCUMBENCY IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

A third important body of work—one which has enjoyed greater success in explaining vote preferences but which in doing so has undermined the economic voting theory—investigates the electoral advantages of congressional incumbency.* Weakening partisanship, candidate-centered mass-media campaigns, the explosive growth of congressional “perks,” and, according to Burnham, the lack of structure in public attitudes on important political issues³⁰ have rendered the connections between national events and congressional elections ever more tenuous. This would not in itself contradict the conclusions drawn from macro political research—if the marginal effects of the systematic variables were sufficiently large—but it certainly adds to the burden that the economic voting theory must bear.

More damaging to that theory is the insight this research has given us into the primary components of the individual voting decisions. Evidence has accumulated that what matters most to voters is the choice offered by the particular pair of candidates in the district. This requires an important revision of accepted theories of congressional voting behavior. The pioneering work of Donald Stokes and Warren Miller,²⁹ reinforced by later research³⁰ found most voters to be ignorant of congressional candidates and issues and dependent upon party and other simple cues (incumbency, remembering the candidates' names, feelings about the president) to guide the voting decision. Since so little was known of the candidates—about half the voters regularly forget the name of the House candidate they voted for³¹—visible national forces such as the state of the economy and opinions about the president would seem to have ample opportunity to influence voting.

The national surveys used in almost all of this research (the series of SRC/CPS National Election Studies) provided some early clues that more complex phenomena were operating. For example, respondents reported voting more for incumbents than for challengers even if they could not recall their names³²—a mysterious finding if simple name recall is all that is involved. Alan Abramowitz discovered that respondents in one Oregon congressional district could evaluate candidates quite readily without remembering their names, and more significantly, that these evaluations were the most important determinants of their votes.³³ One of us (Jacobson) reported similar findings about 1974 Senate voters.³⁴ Thomas Mann clarified the issue by showing that voters were able to recognize candidates' names (which is all they have to do in the voting booth) much more readily than they could recall them and that recognition of candidates was accompanied by assessments of their (mainly personal) virtues and defects, which had a strong impact on the vote quite apart from the voter's party identification.³⁵

The idea that voters' evaluations of the particular candidates are crucially important in determining their preferences

has been given overwhelming support by the 1978 CPS National Election Study. This study contains the most comprehensive information available on congressional voting with a large number of new questions and an additional set of contextual data on the districts in which sample respondents resided. A consistent finding reported in early papers exploiting these data is that voters' assessments of the two candidates are at least as important as party attachments in determining how people vote and that these assessments are vastly more important than any other factor.³⁶ Specifically, incumbents do so well because they are well known and, what is more important, well liked; their challengers do so poorly because they are obscure and held in low regard.

The incumbents' greater renown and attractiveness are the primary source of the incumbency advantage; this becomes clear when the components of the vote choice are understood. Consider the two regression equations in table 2.1.³⁷ The first treats the vote as a function of variables conventionally found to be important: the voter's party identification, familiarity with the candidates, and the incumbency status of the candidates. All of these theoretically important variables have a statistically significant impact on the vote, and together they account for half the overall variance in the sample's preferences.

The second equation adds a set of variables representing voters' assessments of the candidates: whether or not they like or dislike something about each. The regression estimates suggest that the incumbency and familiarity variables are largely surrogates for voters' evaluations of the candidates. Each of the four evaluative variables has a strong and separable impact on the vote; something liked or disliked changes the probability of voting for the Democrat by from .157 to .316 independently of other factors. Collectively, these variables account for an impressive 30 percent of the variance; the second most important factor, party identification, accounts for only 17 percent. All the variables together explain 62 percent of the variance in the vote.³⁸

TABLE 2.1. Regression Models of the Voting Decision: 1978 House Elections

	Regression Coefficient	t Ratio	Beta ^a
Dependent Variable			
Respondent's vote (N = 873)			
Independent Variables			
Equation 2.1			
Party identification	.210	16.03	.40
Democrat is incumbent	.142	3.67	.14
Republican is incumbent	-.153	-3.76	-.15
Familiarity with Democrat	.098	5.38	.15
Familiarity with Republican	-.151	-8.13	-.25
Constant	.542		
$R^2 = .50$			
Equation 2.2			
Party identification	.156	13.04	.30
Democrat is incumbent	.060	1.74	.06
Republican is incumbent	-.055	-1.39	-.05
Familiarity with Democrat	.073	4.09	.11
Familiarity with Republican	-.099	-5.55	-.16
Likes something about Democrat	.199	7.49	.19
Dislikes something about Democrat	-.189	-6.18	-.14
Likes something about Republican	-.316	-10.40	-.30
Dislikes something about Republican	.157	4.81	.11
Constant	.578		
$R^2 = .62$			

SOURCE: 1976 NES/CPS National Election Study.

^aStandardized regression coefficient.

The point of this literature for any theory of national conditions and electoral change is plain. The dominant components of the individual voting decision are the voter's opinions about the candidates running in the district. In 1978, at least, voters' feelings about President Carter and ratings of his job performance had little appreciable effect on the congressional vote once these other variables were taken into account.³⁹ The same is true of voters' opinions about how effectively the government was handling the problems of inflation and unemploy-

ment. The voters focused upon the choices in front of them rather than upon broad national issues.

An additional point established by the 1978 study, which will become relevant to our discussion in the next chapter, is that the very high rate of success enjoyed by House incumbents is basically a consequence of weak opposition.⁴⁰ They are re-elected easily because, in most cases, they are not opposed by attractive, adequately publicized challengers. At the district level, the outcome of the election depends in large part on the electoral choice presented to the voters by a particular pair of candidates. In races involving incumbents, the quality of the challenger and the vigor of his campaign turn out to be the crucial variables.⁴¹

DISTRICT LEVEL VARIABLES VS. NATIONAL POLITICAL FORCES

The problem survey studies pose for any theory associating elections with national political conditions is that district-level forces explain so much of the individual vote choice and national-level forces so little. From the perspective of those seeking to understand the sources of electoral change, this last body of research appears to reveal idiosyncrasy run amok. But does it? Can these findings be reconciled with—indeed, even inform—the equally robust, but substantively different, findings from aggregate-level research? This question has been ignored by those engaged in hot pursuit of the sources of the incumbency advantage. And those developing the aggregate economic voting models have explicitly denied the need for such a linkage. In light of these recent findings, Kramer's 1971 argument, for example, appears mistaken:

Although individual races may deviate from the overall pattern, in general it seems that most Congressional candidates appear to most voters simply as Democrats or Republicans, and not as clearly defined personalities with their

own policy views and records; and hence, variations in the overall popularity of the parties should be a major factor in producing short-term fluctuations in the Congressional vote.⁴²

Four years later Arcelus and Meltzer were not claiming that candidates and campaigns are unimportant but that they are irrelevant to the aggregate-level research because, “local issues and personalities. . . [are] assumed to be independent of aggregate economic variables.”⁴³ And Bloom and Price, while conceding that “candidate personalities may play an important role,” concluded that, “as long as they are not correlated with income changes their omission does not bias resulting estimates of the impact of economic conditions on the vote.”⁴⁴ We believe that the assumptions that candidates and campaigns are idiosyncratic, should cancel out across districts, and are otherwise unrelated to national-level forces are dead wrong. In the next chapter we demonstrate, from commonly accepted notions about elite political behavior, why this must be so.