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National Forces In the 1986 U.S. House Elections

Analysis of the ABC News/*Washington Post* Congressional District Poll and related data demonstrates that voting in 1986 elections to the U.S. House of Representatives was strongly affected both by the strength of nonincumbent candidates (measured by campaign spending) and by voters' opinions on national issues. Moreover, strong candidacies and issue opinions were mutually reinforcing: stronger challengers benefitted more from favorable national issues, and the influence of national issues was greater in districts with well-financed challenges. Thus, even when national forces present few exploitable issues and inspire few strong challenges, issue voting occurs when local conditions are conducive to it.

The 1986 elections to the U.S. House of Representatives were, by historical standards, remarkably uneventful. Since 1946, the president's party has lost an average of 30 of its House seats at midterm; the midterm loss during a president's second term has averaged 43 seats. The best the president's party has done in any of these elections is to lose "only" 29 seats. In 1986, the Republicans lost a net of five seats. Only six incumbents were defeated, five Republicans and one Democrat, with the Democrats winning one additional net open seat. This stasis is all the more notable when set against the 1986 Senate elections, in which Democrats defeated seven Republican incumbents, gained eight seats, and took over majority control.

Why was there so little action in the House elections? One explanation is that national conditions were not conducive to any substantial Democratic gains.[1] The economy was in its fourth year of steady growth; real income per capita increased by 3.1% during 1986. President Reagan enjoyed widespread popular support, with 63% approving his job performance at election time; the events of "Irangate" had not yet become public knowledge. These circumstances, combined with the fact that Republicans had made only limited gains in 1984 and so had relatively few seats at risk (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986), protected House Republicans from the customary fate of the president's copartisans at the second midterm.

Another explanation for the lack of action was that both parties mounted so few serious challenges. Absent serious challenges, incumbents are rarely defeated regardless of national conditions (Jacobson 1987). By the measure of experience, both Republicans and Democrats fielded unusually weak collections of challengers. Only 10% of the Democratic incumbents faced Republican challengers who had previously held elective office—the smallest proportion in any postwar election. Only 19% of the Republican incumbents faced experienced Democratic challengers, whereas 40% had done so in 1982 and 42% in 1974. On another, closely related dimension, relatively few challengers enjoyed adequately funded campaigns; the ratio of incumbent to challenger expenditures in contested elections was 2.9:1, the highest in any election since accurate campaign spending data have been available. On average, 1986 House challengers spent less in real dollars than any class of challengers since 1978.

These two explanations are, of course, complementary, since potential challengers with the greatest capacity to mount serious campaigns behave strategically (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson forthcoming). They are more inclined to run when national conditions favor their party, less inclined when conditions favor the other party. It is not difficult to understand why neither party's potential challengers saw much promise in 1986. Certainly Republicans would doubt their chances of defeating Democrats who had survived Reagan's triumphant landslide in 1984, particularly now that he no longer headed their ticket. Ambitious Democrats, aware of the usual second-term midterm pattern, may have had more reason to challenge Republican incumbents. But the growing economy, Reagan's approval rating—20 points higher than it had been in the recession year of 1982—and the dearth of Republican targets as a legacy of 1984 would be discouraging. In particular, Republican incumbents who had survived 1982 would scarcely appear vulnerable in 1986. Campaign contributors, responding to the same considerations as well as to the shortage of attractive candidates, would not find many promising "investments" among challengers. Given the absence of national trends and the convergent expectations and strategies of politicians and their supporters, it is not so surprising that the 1986 House elections proved uneventful.

Ironically, this "dull" election was exceptionally well monitored. During the campaign, ABC News and the *Washington Post* collaborated in polling more than 8,000 potential voters in 60 randomly selected House districts across the country. Respondents were called during the third week of September and asked about their interest and preferences in the local House race and their opinions on a variety of

national political issues. Those who reported that they were registered to vote were reinterviewed briefly during the last two weeks of the campaign to check on their vote intention and their responses to current national issues. A total of 5,049 respondents in the 47 districts with contested races reported their vote preference in the second wave of the survey, and they are the focus of this paper.

The survey was designed to give the sponsoring organizations a more accurate forecast of the 1986 seat swing than could be gleaned from a national cross-section survey of voters. Curiously, the poll asked no questions about the candidates (other than the vote choice), so it did not take full advantage of its design. Still, a survey with large district-level samples affords an unprecedented opportunity to examine how strategic candidacies interact with national issues to influence voting decisions.

By basing their decisions to run for Congress on national political conditions, candidates magnify the direct effects of national forces on congressional elections, even when their campaigns distract voters from national issues. Incumbents busy themselves reminding voters of the goods brought home from the federal larder, while challengers—that is, those few who actually muster a real campaign—enlist tight "sound bites" to air negative campaigns and project personal charm. None of this, of course, need have anything to do with national issues. The effects of national political conditions are enhanced by strategic career decisions quite independently of what candidates may have to say in the campaign.

Local House campaigns are not bereft of national political content, however; and insofar as they are not, our understanding of the effects of strategic politicians on the national congressional vote is incomplete. Just as shrewd candidates assess national conditions in deciding whether to make the race, so too should they consider the issues raised by national conditions in deciding how to cast their appeal. If a prospective Democratic challenger in 1982 decided that high unemployment improved her chances enough to make a run against the Republican incumbent worthwhile, would she then choose to ignore that issue in the campaign? The same national ingredients that contribute to the decision to run should similarly shape the themes of the campaign.

To the extent that voters are attentive to campaigns, their voting choices should reflect the candidates' strategic calculus. Voters in districts with strong challengers will become more attuned to national issues—at least in their local effects—than voters in districts where the campaigns are so impoverished that these issues never get aired. And

even those voters already disposed to respond to national forces with their vote need candidates whose positions on the issues they can compare with their own. In short, when national issues have competitive local sponsors, they should have a greater effect on individual voting preferences.

The ABC News/*Washington Post* survey provides enough respondents in different electoral settings so that we can investigate the effects of local campaigns on national issue voting. Admittedly, with national political breezes calm and with many strong prospects consequently postponing their entry into the arena, the 1986 election is less promising than most for a study of the interaction of issues and candidates. Nonetheless, there is sufficient variety among the 47 contested campaigns monitored by the survey to allow us to explore this phenomenon. Indeed, if issue voting is enhanced by strong candidacies in this quiet election, interactions should be even stronger, and the impact of national issues greater, during more turbulent times.

Complementing the survey data with information on past electoral conditions in the district and on candidate expenditures from the Federal Election Commission, we have in Table 1 classified each of the 47 districts according to incumbency status and the strength of candidacies. A quirk in our data made it simple to distinguish strong from weak challengers. Among the districts sampled, every challenger spent either less than $244,000 or more than $454,000, making it easy to classify weak and strong challengers. Conveniently, this break in the data falls across the $300,000 threshold that, according to earlier work (Jacobson 1987), is a reasonable estimate of the minimum spending necessary to mount a serious challenge in an election year without strong partisan trends.[2] Still, the absence of districts with intermediate levels of challenger spending must exaggerate the impact of this challenger quality variable on voting preferences in the survey. For open seats, the breaks in campaign spending are less decisive; we chose $275,000 as the cut-off. Six of the 18 open-seat campaigns failed to achieve this level of spending.

Among all Republican incumbents with opposition in 1986, 10% (14 of 142) faced Democratic challengers who spent more than $454,000. In districts surveyed, 22% (4 of 18) faced strong Democratic challengers; because competitive districts were oversampled, these districts hold 39% of the respondents in Republican districts. Six percent (10 of 178) of all Democratic incumbents faced strong Republican challengers; two districts with a strong Republican challenger turned up in the survey (2 of 20, 10%). Again, because competitive districts were oversampled, 17% of respondents in Democratic districts were from

TABLE 1
Districts in the ABC News/*Washington Post*
Congressional District Poll

District		Democrat		Republican	N
Democratic Incumbents					
Strong Challenger					
Tennessee 3	(54)	Marilyn Lloyd	(46)	Jim Golden	183
Missouri 2	(48)	Robert A. Young	(52)	Jack Buechner	112
Weak Challenger					
Arizona 2	(73)	Morris K. Udall	(23)	Sheldon Clark	79
California 5	(75)	Sala Burton	(22)	Mike Garza	81
California 13	(70)	Norman Y. Mineta	(30)	Bob Nash	81
Colorado 1	(68)	Patricia Schroeder	(32)	Joy Wood	82
Georgia 7	(66)	Buddy Darden	(34)	Joe Morecraft	107
Illinois 5	(70)	William Lipinski	(30)	Daniel Sobieski	77
Iowa 4	(68)	Neal Smith	(32)	Bob Lockard	81
Kansas 4	(64)	Dan Glickman	(36)	Bob Knight	82
Minnesota 1	(72)	Timothy Penny	(28)	Paul Grawe	92
Minnesota 8	(72)	James Oberstar	(28)	Dave Rued	71
New Jersey 3	(59)	James J. Howard	(41)	Brian Kennedy	96
New Jersey 8	(63)	Robert A. Roe	(37)	Thomas Zampino	76
New York 7	(76)	Gary Ackerman	(24)	Edward Rodriguez	35
New York 33	(85)	Henry J. Nowak	(15)	Charles Walker	83
Tennessee 5	(59)	William Boner	(41)	Terry Holcomb	71
Texas 2	(67)	Charles Wilson	(33)	Julian Gordon	70
Washington 2	(73)	Al Swift	(27)	Thomas Talnıan	78
Washington 6	(72)	Norman Dicks	(28)	Kenneth Braaten	93
Republican Incumbents					
Strong Challenger					
New York 30	(51)	Louise Slaughter	(49)	Fred J. Eckert	191
North Carolina 6	(50)	Robin Britt	(50)	Howard Coble	253
Texas 6	(44)	Pete Geren	(56)	Joe L. Barton	201
Virginia 10	(40)	John G. Millikan	(60)	Frank R. Wolf	163
Weak Challenger					
California 20	(28)	Jules Moquin	(72)	William Thomas	81
California 39	(24)	David Vest	(76)	W. Dannemeyer	89
California 42	(25)	M. P. Blackburn	(75)	Dan Lungren	74
California 43	(25)	Joseph Chirra	(75)	Ron Packard	77
Colorado 6	(34)	Chuck Norris	(66)	Dan L. Schaefer	86
Indiana 3	(50)	Thomas Ward	(50)	John Hiler	120
Indiana 4	(30)	Gregory A. Scher	(70)	Dan Coats	78
Massachusetts 1	(22)	Robert Weiner	(78)	Silvio Conte	89
Michigan 11	(36)	R. C. Anderson	(64)	Robert W. Davis	76
Nevada 2	(42)	Pete Sferrazza	(58)	B. Vucanovich	166
New York 5	(35)	Michael Sullivan	(65)	Raymond McGrath	67
New York 22	(27)	Eleanor Burlingham	(69)	Benjamin Gilman	78
Tennessee 1	(30)	John B. Russell	(70)	James H. Quillen	85
Texas 26	(32)	George Richardson	(68)	Dick Armey	104

(continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

District		Democrat		Republican	N
Open Seats					
Arizona 1	(29)	Harry Braun III	(71)[a]	John Rhodes III	93
California 2	(41)	S. Swendimian	(59)[a]	Wally Herger	182
Indiana 5	(52)[a]	James Jontz	(48)[a]	James Butcher	171
Nevada 1	(55)[a]	James Bilbray	(45)[a]	Bob Ryan	239
New York 6	(68)[a]	Floyd Flake	(32)	Richard Dietl	34
North Carolina 3	(64)[a]	Martin Lancaster	(36)	Gerald Hurst	72
North Carolina 10	(43)	Lester D. Roark	(57)[a]	Cass Bellenger	197
Pennsylvania 7	(39)	Bill Springler	(61)[a]	Curt Weldon	172
Texas 21	(39)[a]	Pete Snelson	(61)[a]	Lamar Smith	104

Note: Percentage of votes won is listed in parentheses.

[a] Strong candidate for open seat.

these districts. Open seats are oversampled both in the number that were surveyed and in the number of interviews taken, so we can subject voting in these districts to a much more detailed examination than was heretofore possible.[3]

Strategic Politicians in 1986

Regardless of national conditions, local circumstances have the strongest effect on political career strategies. This influence is most obvious when a seat becomes open; these contests attract a much higher proportion of experienced nonincumbents than do races involving incumbents (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989). But the influence of local conditions is also evident when a seat is held by an incumbent; for example, the smaller the incumbent's margin in the last election, the more likely he or she is to face a strong challenge (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Bianco 1984; Canon 1985; Jacobson 1989). Strategic career decisions are thus open to cross-sectional as well as longitudinal examination. Using the ABC News/*Washington Post* survey, we are able to complement the usual aggregate data on district electoral politics with measures of district opinion that indicate how favorable local views on national issues were to Republicans or Democrats. Strategic behavior by potential candidates should produce stronger challenges in districts where the climate of opinion is more favorable to the challengers' party. Evidence that this

TABLE 2
District Conditions and the Strength of Challenges in 1986 House Elections
(in mean percentages)

District Condition	Republican Incumbent		Democratic Incumbent	
	Weak Challenger	Strong Challenger	Strong Challenger	Weak Challenger
Mean Democratic Vote, 1984	33.0	43.9	52.3	64.6
Mean Vote for Reagan, 1984	63.7	64.3	64.5	53.6
Party Identification				
Democrats	37.9	43.7	39.9	54.7
Republicans	56.7	50.7	52.2	39.0
Reagan Job Rating				
Approve	72.8	68.6	71.9	58.5
Disapprove	25.4	28.7	23.7	37.8

Note: Figures for the first two conditions are based on aggregate data from all relevant House districts in which challengers spent either less than $245,000 (weak challengers) or more than $453,000 (strong challengers) and so are comparable to the sample of districts surveyed in the ABC News/*Washington Post* Congressional District Poll. The remaining two items are taken from the poll; the full questions are found in the Appendix. Entries are the mean percentages across districts; the results are virtually identical if percentages are taken from the combined responses in each category.

was indeed the case in 1986 is found in Table 2. Types of districts are arrayed from left to right in an order that anticipates an increase in proportion of responses favoring Democrats: Republican districts with weak Democratic challengers are on the far left; Democratic districts with weak Republican challengers are on the far right.

Figures for the first two rows in Table 2 are derived from aggregate data on the House districts that fall into the sample. They show that, as in past years (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989), strong challengers ran in districts where their party had done comparatively well in the previous House and presidential elections—especially, of course, the former. The remaining two rows are derived from the survey data. (The exact survey questions may be found in the Appendix). They reveal that strong challengers also prefer districts in which the distribution of party identification and voters' assessments of the Reagan administration's performance are more conducive to their success. Notice that differences between competitive districts held by either party (the middle columns) are relatively small; on three

of the four items, conditions in districts with a strong Republican challenger were more favorable to Republicans than were conditions in strongly contested districts held by Republicans.

Strong challengers read their opportunities with considerable accuracy. The relationships in Table 3 demonstrate that they were far more successful in winning votes than were weak challengers. The fourth column of the table shows that in late September (the first wave of the survey) a much larger proportion of voters preferred strong challengers (46.7%) than preferred weak challengers (25.7%). The strong challengers' advantage had increased by the second wave a month later: in districts with strong challengers, a larger proportion of voters initially favoring the incumbent switched to the challenger (12.6%) than vice versa (10.6%). Weak challengers lost 19.7% of their initial supporters while picking up only 6.1% of the incumbent's initial supporters. Strong challengers also picked up a larger share of undecided voters. If we combine voters who switched preferences and undecideds who made up their minds, strong challengers had picked up support from a net 2.3% of the respondents by the second wave of the survey in late October; weak challengers had lost a net 1.0%. These trends indicate that the strength of the challenge was itself contributing something to the outcome.

More evidence of the effects of strong challenges is in the last column, which displays the defection rates of party identifiers in districts with strong and weak challengers. The difference is striking. Defections to incumbents and challengers were nearly balanced in districts with strong challengers; incumbents enjoyed only a slight advantage. In districts with weak challengers, nearly half of the voters identifying with the challenger's party defected to the incumbent, while only 5% of those identifying with the incumbent's party defected to the challenger. The differences are a bit exaggerated; in districts with strong challengers, the distribution of vote intentions in the sample matches the actual district vote very closely, but for districts with weak challengers the match is poorer, with challengers actually doing, on average, about 6 percentage points better on election day than they did in the survey. Still, it is clear that partisan defections are far more evenly balanced in races involving strong challengers. There is no obvious reason that this result should be attributed to differences among districts; it is more plausibly interpreted as a consequence of differences among challenges.

National Issues

With the strength of the challenge by itself having such a large effect on individual voting and with so few seats changing hands

TABLE 3
The Strength of Challenges and Voting Behavior in the 1986 House Elections
(in percentages)

Vote Intention, Second Wave	Vote Intention, First Wave				Party Identifiers Defecting to Opponent
	Challenger	Undecided	Incumbent	Total	
In Districts with Strong Challengers					
Challenger	89.4	50.0	12.6	46.7	21.7
	(431)	(8)	(76)	(515)	(507)
Incumbent	10.6	50.0	87.4	53.3	17.6
	(51)	(8)	(529)	(588)	(527)
Total	43.7	1.5	54.9	100.0	
	(482)	(16)	(605)	(1103)	
In Districts with Weak Challengers					
Challenger	80.3	42.3	6.1	25.7	45.1
	(545)	(30)	(119)	(694)	(1041)
Incumbent	19.7	57.7	93.9	74.3	5.4
	(134)	(41)	(1836)	(2011)	(1503)
Total	25.1	2.6	72.3	100.0	
	(679)	(71)	(1955)	(2705)	

Note: For columns 1–4, the number of cases is in parentheses; for the final column (indicating party loyalty) the figure in parentheses is the number of cases from which percentages were computed.

nationally, one might conclude that national issues were unimportant in the 1986 House elections. That conclusion would be wrong. Table 4 presents the results of a probit model of the vote choice, with separate estimates for districts held by Democrats and Republicans. The model views the vote as a function of the strength of the challenge and of the respondent's party identification and views on three issues: how Reagan was performing as president, whether the economy was getting better or worse, and whether the U.S. should be willing to shelve the administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) to get an arms reduction agreement with the Soviet Union. Voters' positions on all three issues are, of course, intercorrelated with each other and with party identification, but each has a separable impact on the vote choice. All six coefficients on the issue items have the expected sign, and five of the six are significant at .05 or better.

TABLE 4
Probit Models of the Vote Decision
in 1986 House Elections

Independent Variable	Democratic Incumbent	Republican Incumbent
Constant	.995	−.478
	(.054)	(.048)
Party Identification	.745	.656
	(.049)	(.039)
Strong Challenger	−.431	.618
	(.097)	(.069)
Reagan Approval	−.153	−.204
	(.036)	(.028)
National Economy	−.082^{ns}	−.212
	(.061)	(.052)
Strategic Defense Initiative	.128	.090
	(.046)	(.037)
Log Likelihood	−684.8	−893.3
Percentage Predicted Correctly	79.7	80.0
Null	73.3	64.1
N	1730	2078

Note: The dependent variable is the vote for the Democratic candidate. Standard errors are in parentheses; ns = not significant at $p<.05$, one-tailed.

National issues plainly did play an important role in the 1986 House elections. The potential magnitude of their impact is shown in Table 5. Entries in the table are computed from the probit coefficients in the equations in Table 4. The middle column lists the probability of voting for the Democratic candidate, depending on the voter's party identification and the challenger's strength but assuming the voter takes neutral positions on all three issue items. The column to the left shows what that probability would become if the respondent's position on all three issue items favored the Republicans (that is, if the respondent strongly approved of Reagan's performance, thought the economy was getting better, and did not want to trade SDI for an arms control agreement). The column to the right shows what that probability would become if the respondent's position favored the Democrats on all three items. A comparison of the right and left hand columns shows that views on national issues could make a difference of as much as .39 in districts held by Democrats and .52 in districts held by Republicans in the probability that a respondent would vote for the Democrat.

TABLE 5
Estimated Probabilities of Voting for the Democrat in 1986 House Elections: Interpretations of Equation 1 in Table 4

Candidate and Voters	Voters' Positions on National Issues		
	Favor Republicans	Neutral	Favor Democrats
Democratic Incumbent			
Democratic Voters			
Strong challenger	.79	.90	.97
Weak challenger	.89	.96	.99
Independent Voters			
Strong challenger	.52	.71	.86
Weak challenger	.68	.84	.93
Republican Voters			
Strong challenger	.24	.43	.63
Weak challenger	.39	.60	.78
Republican Incumbent			
Democratic Voters			
Strong challenger	.53	.79	.94
Weak challenger	.29	.57	.82
Independent Voters			
Strong challenger	.28	.56	.80
Weak challenger	.12	.32	.60
Republican Voters			
Strong challenger	.11	.30	.58
Weak challenger	.03	.13	.34

Note: "Favor Republicans" = approve strongly of Reagan's performance, think the economy is improving, oppose trading SDI for an arms control agreement. "Favor Democrats" = disapprove strongly of Reagan's performance, think the economy is getting worse, support trading SDI for an arms control agreement. "Neutral" = neither approve nor disapprove of Reagan's performance, think the economy is staying the same, no opinion on SDI.

Observe also, however, that the strength of the challenge has a large impact on the vote even when partisanship and national issues are taken into account. It makes a difference of up to .17 in Democratic districts and up to .24 in Republican districts in the probability that a respondent would vote for the Democrat. That is, the 20-point advantage enjoyed by strong challengers, evident in Table 3, holds up with controls on partisanship and national issues.

TABLE 6
Interactive Models of the Vote Decision
in 1986 House Elections

Independent Variable	Democratic Incumbent	Republican Incumbent
Constant	.953	−.485
	(.051)	(.046)
Party Identification	.747	.670
	(.048)	(.039)
Strong Challenger	−.226[ns]	.662
	(.140)	(.073)
Issue Index	.113	.153
	(.021)	(.019)
Interaction of Strong	.115	.055
Challenger and Issue Index	(.053)	(.030)
Log Likelihood	−682.7	−894.9
Percentage Predicted Correctly	79.9	79.9
Null	73.3	64.1
N	1730	2078

Note: The dependent variable is the vote for the Democratic candidate; ns = not significant at $p<.05$, one-tailed.

Interactions

Candidacies and national issues separately influence the vote choice; do they also reinforce one another's effects? There are good theoretical reasons for expecting that national issues would have a greater impact on voters' decisions in competitive elections than in noncompetitive ones. Without an active opponent, the incumbent's unchallenged personal stature and performance may dominate the decision to the exclusion of other issues. Voters may find it more difficult to express their views on national politics via the ballot without a visible alternative candidate to embody them. Potentially compelling national issues may have little effect if no candidate has the resources to exploit them. Previous research on this question has produced decidedly mixed results (Jacobson 1986). In 1986, however, interactions are clearly evident. As the results reported in Table 6 show, the impact of issues was enhanced by a strong challenge. The issue index used in these equations is a simple additive index constructed from respondents' views on Reagan, the economy, and SDI. It takes values ranging from −4 (issue positions most favorable to Republicans) to +4 (issue positions most favorable to Democrats).[4] Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate graphically how these interactions worked.

FIGURE 1
Probability of Voting for Democratic Candidate
in Districts with Democratic Incumbents

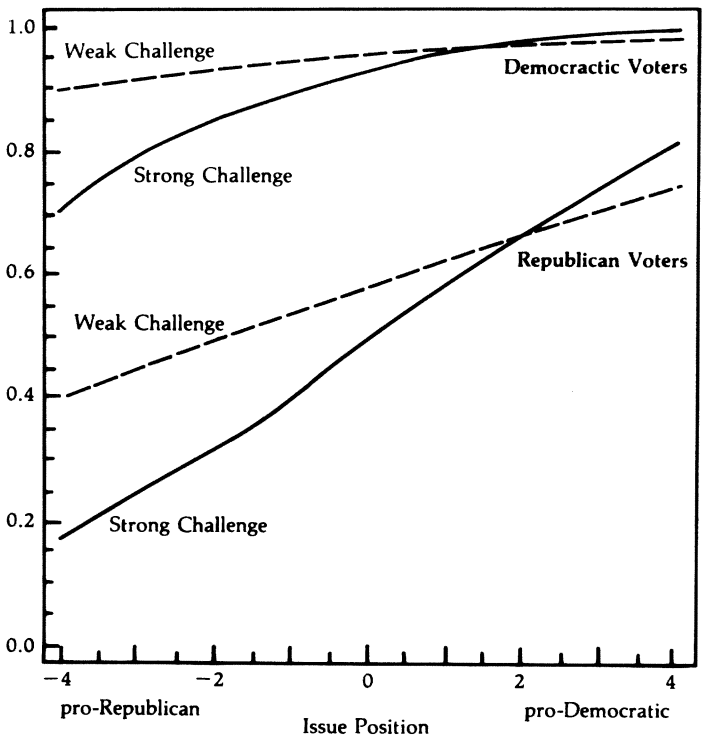
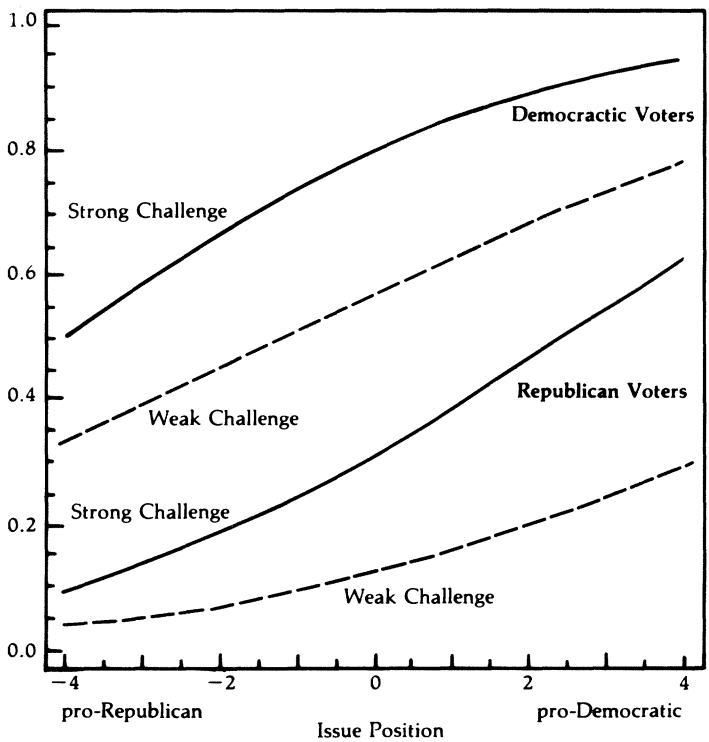


Figure 1 shows how the probability of voting for the Democratic incumbent varied among both Democratic and Republican voters depending on whether the challenger was strong or weak and on what the respondent's position was on the issue index. Figure 2 displays the same information for districts with Republican incumbents. Figure 3 shows the effects of the same variables on independent voters in both types of districts. In all three settings, the impact of issues is larger in districts with strong challengers, and the effect of a strong challenge is enhanced among voters with issue positions favorable to the challenger's party.

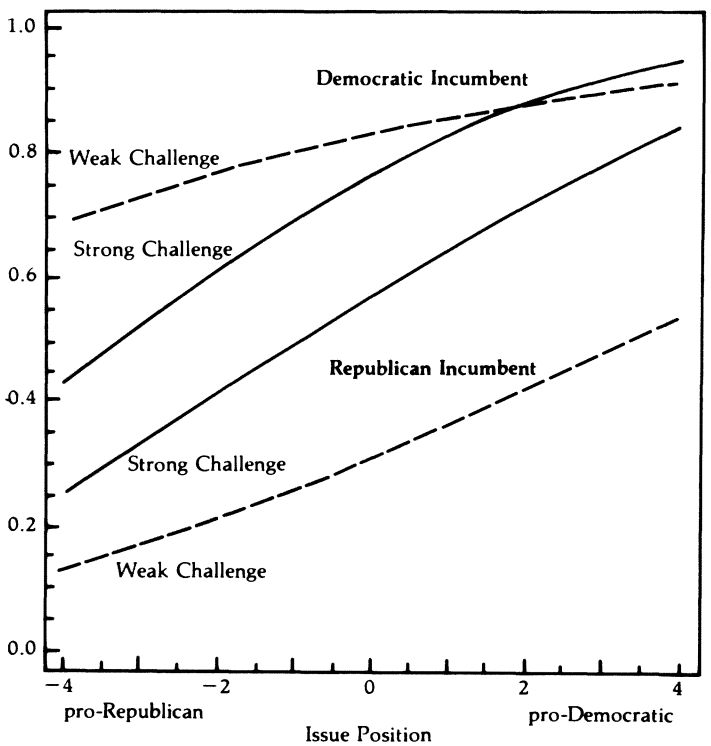
Figure 1 shows that strong Republican challengers were better able to use favorable issue positions to stem defections to the Democratic incumbent and to win Democratic votes than mere weak Repub-

FIGURE 2
Probability of Voting for Democratic Candidate
in Districts with Republican Incumbents



lican challengers. The more issues worked against them, however, the smaller the difference in support between strong and weak challengers. Figure 2 indicates that strong Democratic challengers were also more successful in turning favorable issue positions to their advantage, most notably among Republican voters. Strong Democratic challengers do not appear to have enhanced issue voting among Democrats, but only because support for them was already so high (reaching the point where the cumulative normal distribution flattens out). Interaction effects are clearest among independent voters (Figure 3). The benefit of a strong challenge by either party increases as independent voters' issue positions become more favorable to the party. Strong candidates are evidently better able to exploit favorable issues, and voters' issue positions

FIGURE 3
Probability of Voting for Democratic Candidate
Among Independent Voters in All Districts
with Incumbents Running



have a stronger influence on their decisions in contests involving a strong challenge.

Because Reagan's performance was the most influential of the three issues we examine, our results suggest that the widespread approval of Reagan (see Table 2) should have been an important Republican asset. Certainly it offered some advantage to strong Republican challengers, though there were few around to enjoy it. But it is important to remember that Republican challengers were, by definition, trying to do better than their predecessors had in 1984, when Reagan was equally popular and also headed the ticket. The president's continuing popularity may have conferred little additional advantage and so may

TABLE 7
Negative Voting in the 1986 House Elections
(in percentages)

Voters	Reagan's Job Performance	
	Approve	Disapprove
Defectors to Opposing Party's Candidate		
Democrats	26.8	13.1
	(927)	(1254)
Republicans	19.8	51.7
	(2297)	(174)
Independent Voters		
For Democrat	45.9	71.4
For Republican	54.1	28.6
	(185)	(70)

Note: The number of cases from which percentages were computed are in parentheses.

not have helped Republican challengers actually win, though it may have kept them from losing by larger margins. There is evidence for this explanation in the aggregate data; the vote for strong Republican challengers fell less than the vote for weak Republican challengers between 1984 and 1986.

While Reagan's popularity may not have boosted Republican challengers to victory, it no doubt made life more difficult for Democratic challengers. Its effect was mitigated, however, because negative voting predominated in 1986. That is, disapproval of the president's performance had a much larger effect on voting than did approval (Kernell 1977). The evidence is in Table 7. Republicans who disapproved of Reagan's performance were twice as likely to defect to the opposition in House contests as were Democrats who approved of it. And Democrats who disapproved of Reagan's performance were noticeably less likely to defect than were Republicans who approved it. Among independent voters, disapprovers voted more consistently for the Democrat than approvers voted for the Republican. Thus disapproval of Reagan had a much more decisive impact on voters' House choices than did approval.

Open Seats

Open seats pose special opportunities for prospective candidates. With more than 90% of incumbents normally winning reelection,

many aspiring candidates—especially promising ones with resources at risk—stay on the sidelines waiting for the seat to become vacant. This makes clear strategic sense; in postwar elections, the chances of taking a seat from the other party are four times greater when the seat is open (Jacobson 1989). Vacant seats release the pent-up demand, and candidates rush into the primaries seeking their party's nomination. The advantages of not having to face an incumbent override the normal calculus of challengers. Where an open seat is available, prospective candidates generally pay little strategic attention to the national political breezes. Vigorous, expensive campaigns lasting from spring until November were the result in 1986 as in previous years; for example, 60% of the candidates for open House seats in 1986 had previously held elective office and they spent, on average, more than $400,000.

Strategic reactions to national conditions may be similarly muted in the candidates' selection of campaign issues. Without an incumbent who has a record to defend, neither candidate has a suitable local target to attack for unpopular national policies. Moreover, both candidates can embrace the same popular policies, thus neutralizing these issues in voters' decisions. Just as nonincumbent Republicans were free to dissociate themselves from Reaganomics in 1982, their Democratic counterparts were free to praise the popular president in 1986.

This argument does not mean that national issues have no place in campaigns for open seats. Voters in these districts did respond to national conditions in making their choice, and we may assume that what concerns voters will also concern candidates. The absence of an incumbent and abundance of vigorous campaigns does mean, however, that national issues may be played out differently in different open districts.

All of the open districts in the sample attracted a strong candidate from at least one party, and three produced strong candidates from both parties (see Table 1). The consequences are like those in districts held by incumbents: the strength of open-seat candidacies clearly has an independent effect on voting decisions. The effects of national issues and candidate strength in open-seat contests are estimated by the probit model presented in Table 8.

Across the nine open seats surveyed, voters' views on national issues contributed substantially to their choice. All of the issue coefficients display the correct sign; only SDI falls short of statistical significance. The strength of the candidates also has a major influence on the vote; the estimated effect of these variables in combination is shown in Table 9.

TABLE 8
Probit Model of the Vote Decision
in 1986 House Elections for Open Seats

Independent Variable	Coefficient
Constant	.405
	(.179)
Party Identification	.725
	(.050)
Strong Democrat	.353
	(.090)
Strong Republican	−.615
	(.166)
Reagan Approval	−.183
	(.037)
National Economy	−.146
	(.067)
Strategic Defense Initiative	.064[ns]
	(.050)
Log Likelihood	−550.7
Percentage Predicted Correctly	81.5
Null	56.4
N	1241

Note: The dependent variable is the vote for the Democratic candidate. Standard errors are in parentheses; ns = not significant at $p<.05$, one-tailed.

By this evidence, the potential impact of national issues on the vote choice is at least as great in open seats as it is in districts contested by incumbents (compare Table 9 with Table 5). The probability of voting for the Democrat could vary by as much as .44 between voters who favored the Republican side on all three issues and those who favored the Democratic side on all three issues. The strength of candidacies also has a notable effect, with a difference as large as .37 in the probability of voting for the Democrat between districts in which only the Democrat was a strong candidate and districts in which only the Republican was a strong candidate.

Issues and candidacies should also interact to influence the vote in contests for open seats. Because at least one strong candidate contested each of the open districts surveyed, however, such effects cannot be measured in the available data. With campaigns in open districts less fixed by the peculiar resources, strategies, and records of incumbents and by challengers' need to give voters a compelling reason for

TABLE 9
Estimated Probabilities of Voting for the Democrat in 1986 House Elections for Open Seats: Interpretations of Equation in Table 8

Voters	Voters' Positions on National Issues		
	Favor Republicans	Neutral	Favor Democrats
Democratic			
Only Democrat Strong	.82	.93	.98
Both Candidates Strong	.61	.81	.93
Only Republican Strong	.47	.70	.86
Independent			
Only Democrat Strong	.57	.78	.91
Both Candidates Strong	.33	.56	.76
Only Republican Strong	.22	.42	.64
Republican			
Only Democrat Strong	.29	.51	.73
Both Candidates Strong	.12	.28	.50
Only Republican Strong	.07	.17	.36

Note: "Favor Republicans" = approve strongly of Reagan's performance, think the economy is improving, oppose trading SDI for an arms control agreement. "Favor Democrats" = disapprove strongly of Reagan's performance, think the economy is getting worse, support trading SDI for an arms control agreement. "Neutral" = neither approve nor disapprove of Reagan's performance, think the economy is staying the same, no opinion on SDI.

switching representatives, open-seat campaigns invite strong candidates to mold campaigns that best match their strengths and the perceived concerns of the district. Thus interaction effects are likely to be idiosyncratic and complex (Jacobson and Kernell 1987).

A final caveat is in order. Constrained as we are by the limits of the survey, our models are obviously oversimplified. We do not, for example, have any measures of voters' evaluations of the pair of candidates running in the district, and it is easy to imagine a variety of complex paths that might link, say, party identification, issue positions, candidate evaluations, and candidate strength. Hence we do not claim to offer comprehensive models of the vote choice in 1986. Our purpose has been narrower: to demonstrate that candidacies and issues interact to influence voting behavior in House elections.

Conclusion

As evidence began to mount during the 1960s that political parties were losing their grip on voters' loyalties, the question arose as to what features of the electoral environment voters would turn to in deciding their votes. Had suitable conditions for issue voting finally arrived, or would citizens become yet more susceptible to candidates' artfully composed images?

The great share of the evidence suggests the latter. In presidential voting, candidate images have largely filled the partial vacuum created by weakening party ties (Miller, Miller, Raine, and Brown 1976). A variety of signs from congressional voting point to the same conclusion. Since the 1960s, presidential coattails have been shortened by half (Ferejohn and Calvert 1984), incumbent's victory margins have grown, and aggregate congressional election results have become less sensitive to the performances of the economy and the administration. Arguably, issue concerns have less to do with the choices of voters in the U.S. today and during eras of party voting.

The evidence presented here, however, suggests that the dichotomy between candidate and issue voting is—or at least, can be—a false one. In a setting where political parties fail to serve as effective vehicles for programs, issues depend heavily upon the sponsorship of politicians. If candidates fail to embrace issues, or if those who do embrace issues fail through lack of talent or resources to attract the attention of voters, issues cannot have much chance of influencing voting decisions.

If issues are to influence voters, voters must have a choice. In congressional elections, choice requires strong challengers. Challengers are the political system's natural risk takers. While incumbents may be perfectly content to ignore controversial issues and to stress instead nonpartisan services to the district, challengers, unable to make such an appeal, will search for issues to exploit wherever they may be found, whether in the incumbent's record or national conditions. The interaction between candidate strength and issue voting presented here rests fully on the ability of the challenger to mount a serious campaign.

National forces in 1986 presented few exploitable issues for congressional candidates of either party. Hence, a comparatively feeble crop of challengers took on the typically well-endowed class of incumbents. As a consequence, not much happened; the Democrats gained five House seats. And yet, even in 1986, where local conditions were conducive to issue voting, issue voting appeared. In races involving well-financed nonincumbents, the electoral effects of voters' opinions

on the economy, national defense policy, and the president's job performance, were significantly enhanced. For those few districts, the 1986 election fulfilled Lord Bryce's turn-of-the-century expectation that midterm elections would provide a referendum on the government's performance. What Lord Bryce had not reckoned is that holding an election two years into the president's term is not enough. Real candidates have to show up to contest it. Only then are voters able to respond effectively to national conditions in the polling booths.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questions and Variable Codes

1. PARTY IDENTIFICATION

"Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?" [If independent:] "Do you lean more towards Democratic Party, Republican Party, or neither?" (Wave 1)

1 Democrat or lean Democratic
0 Pure independent
−1 Republican or lean Republican

2. REAGAN JOB RATING

"Do you approve or disapprove of the way Ronald Reagan is handling his job as president?" "Is that approve (disapprove) strongly or approve (disapprove) somewhat?" (Wave 1)

2 Approve strongly
1 Approve somewhat
0 Don't know, not applicable
−1 Disapprove somewhat
−2 Disapprove strongly

For Tables 2 and 7, approvers and disapprovers are collapsed into two categories.

3. VOTE INTENTION, Wave 1

"Thinking about the U.S. House of Representatives election this November in the congressional district where you live, if that election were being held today, for whom would you vote, (DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE), the Democratic candidate, or (REPUBLICAN CANDIDATE), the Republican candidate?"

1 Democrat
0 Undecided, not applicable
−1 Republican

4. VOTE INTENTION, Wave 2

Same question as in Wave 1.

1 Democrat
0 Republican

5. NATIONAL ECONOMY

"Do you think the nation's economy is getting better, getting worse, or staying the same?" (Wave 2)

1 Getting better
0 Staying the same, don't know, not applicable
−1 Getting worse

6. STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE

"President Reagan says it's essential for the U.S. to develop space-based weapons to defend the United States against nuclear attack. He calls the space-based system the Strategic Defense Initiative or 'SDI.' Opponents say that SDI will increase the arms race and cost many billions of dollars. Suppose the only way to get an arms agreement with the Soviet Union is for the U.S. to stop development of space-based weapons. Should the U.S. agree to that or not?" (Wave 2)

1 Yes, U.S. should agree to stop development of SDI
0 Don't know, not applicable
−1 No, U.S. should NOT agree to stop development of SDI

7. STRONG CHALLENGER

1 Challenger spent $454,000 or more
0 Challenger spent $244,000 or less

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference on Economics and Politics, University of California, San Diego, November 14, 1987. We have benefitted from the comments of the conference participants as well as from Janet Grenzke and David Canon.

1. See Kramer (1971) and Tufte (1975, 1978) for the theory behind this explanation. Many others have offered variants and elaborations of Tufte's work. For a summary, see Weatherford (1986).

2. Campaign spending is a better measure of a "strong" challenge than the alternative—prior electoral success—because a relatively high level of spending appears to be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a challenger to win an election (Jacobson 1987). Experience in elective office, while contributing to a challenger's vote and chances of victory, is neither necessary nor sufficient (Jacobson 1989). We replicated the analysis reported here using an alternative measure of challenger strength, a composite of campaign spending and experience, and derived the same substantive results.

3. The bias in these samples is not a serious problem for the kind of analysis reported here, so we do not use weights. The bias does not systematically affect the probit coefficients, and we refer to marginal percentages only within categories, not for the entire sample.

4. Specifically, the index is computed as SDI—Reagan job rating—national economy, with the variables scored as reported in the Appendix.

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