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Author(s): John R. Petrocik and Scott W. Desposato

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# Incumbency and Short-Term Influences on Voters

JOHN R. PETROCIK, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

SCOTT W. DESPOSATO, UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Using NES surveys from 1980 through 2000, this article examines the incumbency advantage with a series of survey reports of the vote, an approach that departs from the convention of estimating the incumbent advantage with aggregate election returns. Previous work conceptualizes the incumbency advantage as a small and stable vote bonus of six to eight percentage points since about 1970, based on aggregate electoral returns. This study provides a different perspective on the incumbency advantage, considering the behavior of individual voters instead of aggregate electoral outcomes. We conceive of incumbency as an anchor that diminishes the influence of short-term tides on voters. Further, the effect of incumbency on voters is neither small nor stable, and varies systematically with short-term political tides.

This analysis revisits generalizations about the value of incumbency by looking at it from the perspective of survey-database reports of the vote.<sup>1</sup> The goal is not to produce a more accurate or even a different estimate of the incumbency advantage. Our focus is on the impact of incumbency on voter choice under varying short-term, election-specific conditions. This formulation is different from the traditional consideration of the influence of incumbency on election outcomes (where districts are the unit of analysis). We believe that the survey data allow us to understand more clearly how short-term forces regulate the impact of incumbency, identifying patterns that will improve our general understanding of macro influences on voter choice. The interactive effect on vote choice of short-term forces and incumbency suggests an “anchor” model of incumbency’s effect on voters that in turn provides a fuller understanding of the electoral effects of incumbency.

## THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO CALCULATING THE INCUMBENT’S ADVANTAGE

The two most common ways of assessing the *net value* of the incumbent’s advantage in legislative (usually congressional) races use election results.<sup>2</sup> Both approaches share a

common definition of the incumbency advantage: the vote share bonus provided by virtue of being an incumbent. They also share the unit of analysis: the district. The two approaches differ in method. One assessment contrasts the vote in adjacent elections when an incumbent is running with the vote in that district when the incumbent does not seek election. Alford and Brady’s (1993) essay on the incumbent advantage illustrates this approach. They observed the difference in terms of a “sophomore surge” and a “retirement slump,” sometimes averaging the “surge” and “slump” values (yielding a “slurge” estimate).<sup>3</sup> Less straightforward estimation techniques attempt to consider confounding effects associated with the party bias of the district and inter-party differences in incumbent success. Gelman and King (1990) produced such an estimate with a model that regressed the Democratic vote on the previous Democratic vote, the party holding the seat, and the incumbency status of the district. The coefficient associated with the incumbency variable in this model presumably yields a more accurate estimate of how much better incumbents can expect to do in any given election, net of other major determinants of the vote.

Although substantially different approaches, the surge, slump, and slurge estimates are similar to the regression model estimates of Gelman and King (see Jacobson 2001). The slurge estimate of the incumbent advantage averaged about 7 points between 1970 and 2000, the Gelman-King technique estimated an 8.5 point advantage. Both observe an increase in the incumbent’s advantage since 1970 (probably first reported by Erikson 1971), some election-to-election oscillation (Gelman-King’s technique finds more

<sup>1</sup> The classic literature on the impact of incumbency on the vote decision would include: Mann 1978; Mann and Wolfinger 1980; and Krehbiel and Wright 1983. Subsequent elaboration that examined the link between incumbency and constituency service (Fiorina 1977; Johannes and McAdams 1981; Yiannakis 1981; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984), candidate awareness (Squire 1992), and fund-raising (Green and Krasno 1988; and Jacobson 1990) helped to identify the vote influences for which incumbency is a proxy.

<sup>2</sup> During the last fifty years, 94 percent of all members of Congress who sought re-election were successful (Orenstein, Mann, and Malbin 1998). This proportion may overstate their well-known job security because it ignores several probable general elections losses among those who decided to retire (averaging about 9 percent). But almost any assumption about what might have happened had retirees sought re-election leaves intact the conclusion that incumbent members of Congress enjoy a high probability of being re-elected. State legislative incumbents are equally

secure. Jewell and Morehouse (2001) reported that 95 percent of those who sought renomination were successful, and 94 percent of the renominated won the general election. Overall, 90 percent of those who ran were renominated and re-elected in the period from 1978 through 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Surge and slump are well understood, but, briefly, the former compares a candidate’s vote in his or her first re-election bid with the vote received in the preceding election while the slump compares the vote for a election with an incumbent with the vote division in the first election following the incumbents retirement. The slurge, which averages the surge and slump estimate, considers the gain and loss side of the incumbent’s greater success with voters.

inter-election variation), and—although this is not completely clear—perhaps a slight decline from a high point in the middle 1980s. Garand and Gross (1984), observed an incumbent advantage and variance in that advantage over an even longer period.

### A SURVEY ESTIMATE OF THE INCUMBENT'S ADVANTAGE

Almost all models of individual voter choice in congressional elections include incumbency as a factor and, without exception, incumbency has an independent influence on the vote (see note 1 for some relevant references). However, the estimate of the typical advantage enjoyed by incumbents has been calculated as an aggregate property, with the district serving as the unit of analysis.

The survey-data-based analysis reported here provides a different perspective. Like previous work, we define the incumbency advantage as the difference between the vote for an incumbent and a substantially identical open-seat candidate. Our method estimates the effect of incumbency as the difference between the observed vote by individuals for an incumbent and the vote that was expected from party identification alone (discussed further below) *compared* to the difference between the observed vote by individuals for an open-seat candidate and the vote that should have been expected from party identification alone. We find that the incumbency advantage can be quite large and variable. The survey data show that voters were about 15 percentage points more likely to vote for the incumbent than they were to vote for an open-seat successor, with a party difference. Voters were about 17 points more likely to support Democratic incumbents than they were to vote for Democrats running in open Democratic seats (open Democratic and open Republican seats are seats held by a Democrat or Republican respectively in the preceding term). GOP incumbents led would-be successors in open Republican seats by about 14 points. These averages cover considerable inter-election variation. For example, the smallest incumbency advantage was observed for Democratic incumbents in 1996, when voters were only about two percentage points more likely to vote for them than they were to vote for Democrats running in open Democratic seats. It was worth the most in 1984, when voters were over 30 percentage points more likely to vote for the Democratic incumbent than they were to support the would-be successor in open Democratic seats.

This variation leads us to suggest a reconceptualization of the incumbency advantage. Instead of a simple and stable bonus for incumbents, we argue that the incumbency advantage varies as a function of short-term political forces. Where incumbents are running, voters are more insulated from these forces. In open seat races, voters drift more strongly with short-term political ties. We call our conceptualization the “anchor model” of incumbency, as voters’ behavior can be anchored by incumbents and protected against short-term tides.

The following pages are divided into three parts. The first presents an overview of the factors that we expect to shape

an individual’s congressional vote. The second part outlines the design of the analysis—considering the preceding review. The final part presents the findings.

### THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE VOTE

The major component of an incumbent’s success is the partisanship of the voters in the district. The minor components are a personal vote increment that incumbents receive by virtue of their positive familiarity to voters and the boost provided by short-term forces (strength of top of the ballot candidates, domestic and foreign conditions, and so forth).

#### *The Party Identification Component*

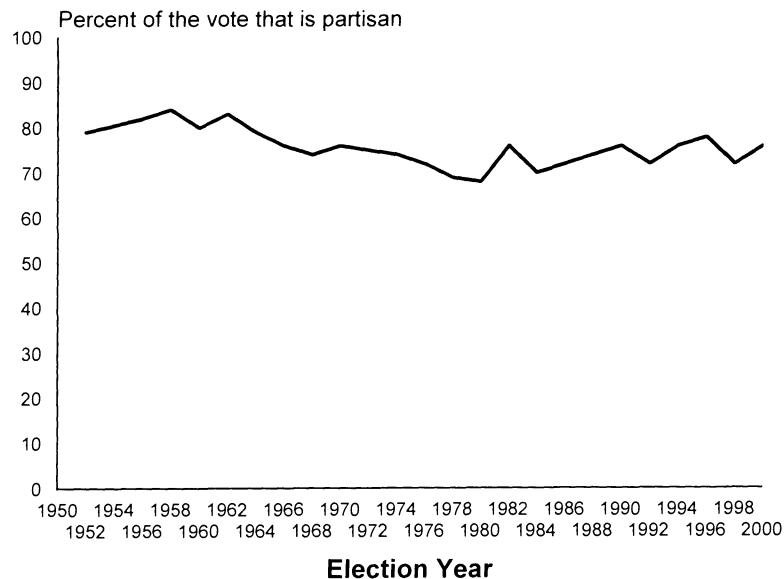
Most voters have a preference for one of the parties, and they invoke that preference in choosing between candidates, the ubiquitous discussion about independent voters and candidate-based voting notwithstanding. Figure 1, which plots the party proportion of the vote for House candidates, documents this point. The *party* vote is the proportion of the total vote for the House that is made up of (1) Democratic identifiers (strong, weak, and leaning identifiers) who reported a Democratic vote for Congress and (2) Republican identifiers (also including leaners) who voted Republican. The *nonparty* portion of the vote is the proportion of all the votes cast by (1) self-described Independents and (2) defectors from an expressed party preference (Democrats who voted Republican or a third party candidate and Republicans who voted for a Democrat or third-party candidate). Although the congressional vote was slightly less partisan in the 1990s (it averaged about 75 percent) than it was in the 1950s (when it averaged about 80 percent), it is clear that the outcome of a congressional election is overwhelmingly shaped by party identification. About 10 percent of the non-partisan fraction of the vote is from Independents and the remaining 15 percent (note that these proportions are averages for the 1990s) represents defection.

#### *Strong Partisan Bases and Weak Challenges*

Since almost all legislative districts are drawn with the underlying partisanship of the voters as the central consideration, the foundation of every incumbent’s security is a district that includes enough voters of his or her party that no likely issue or top-of-the-ticket induced tide will produce defeat.<sup>4</sup> The manifest partisanship has powerful

<sup>4</sup> The largest possible number of office-holders is achieved by economically allocating the party’s voters. At the margin, electoral security and the number of seats are conflicting goals, but the balance is struck when the dominant party provides the “assurance” of victory to the  $N^{\text{th}}$  candidate of the largest possible majority for their party, while providing a “guarantee” of victory to a smaller number from the other party. Minority party incumbents are guaranteed office because, *ceteris paribus*, the redistricting packs minority party supporters together, giving almost all of them substantial majorities. While some number of major party incumbents may face closer contests because their party’s electorate is

≡ FIGURE 1  
PARTY VOTING IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS



Source: NES surveys for the indicated years.

second-order effects as well. The minority party's candidate, viewed as certain to lose, usually receives few of the resources (money and strong support from party leaders) needed to mount a strong challenge in a district with a strong party tilt (Cox and Katz 1996). The most talented candidates of the minority party avoid a campaign in such hopeless districts (Kernell and Jacobson 1981 formulated this as the *strategic politician* phenomenon). In brief, the incumbent in a secure district receives direct and indirect benefits from the partisan base. The result is normally a win that exceeds the partisan tilt of the district (see the discussion accompanying the data in Figure 2).

#### *The Personal Vote Component*

Occasionally incumbents do not get the anticipated easy win and open-seats are more likely (but still not very likely) to change party control. There are many idiosyncratic explanations for these losses, but a systematic factor behind open-seat losses (and defeats following a redistricting) is the absence of the *personal vote* that incumbents create for themselves through constituency service (for classical state-

ments see Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Fiorina 1989; Yiannakis 1981). A large portion of the 15 percent of the vote contributed by defectors and the 10 percent cast by Independents in Figure 1 is a personal vote for the incumbent.<sup>5</sup> The personal vote ensures greater recognition and regard for the incumbent (see Mann and Wolfinger 1980) and, directly and indirectly, lowers the probability that the voters will find a challenger for whom they are likely to have a positive regard, a common party link notwithstanding.

#### *The Short-Term Forces Component*

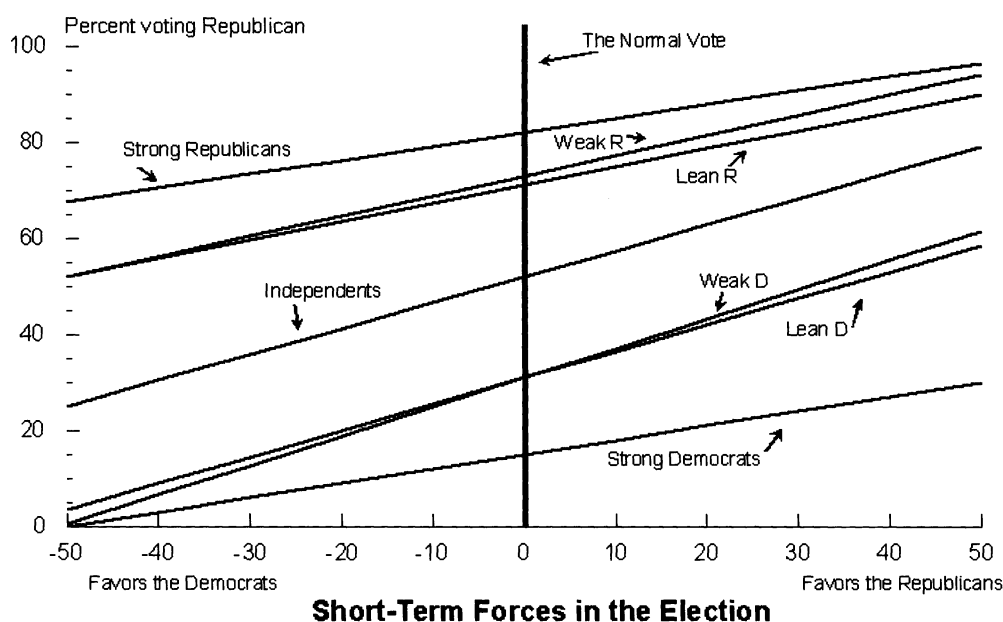
Foreign policy successes and failures, wars, recessions and bursts of prosperity, criminal and personal scandals among governmental figures, reports of bureaucratic misfeasance and malfeasance, successful policy and administrative initiatives, policy failures, and a myriad of other conditions and outcomes of governmental programs create the political environment that defines the short-term forces of the election and shape the retrospective judgments that factor into a voter's decision. For down-ballot legislative races (such as congressional contests) the appeal of the top of the ticket can also represent a significant influence on voters because, although we commonly disparage the notion of coattails, there is no doubt that legislative candidates fare better when the top of the ticket is successful (as the theory of surge and decline stipulates, see Campbell 1993).

Figure 2 illustrates the impact of short-term forces on voters controlling for their party identification, the most meaningful variable for establishing a baseline for expected voter choice. The data are drawn from Petrocik's (1989) re-estimation and application of the normal vote as it was first

spread across a larger number of districts, most incumbents of the majority party will enjoy easy wins. See Kousser (1996) and Cain (1985) for more on this. Note that while incumbents in carefully designed districts may not face serious general election challenges, they may still face primary election challenges from members of their own party. See Stone and Maisel (1999).

<sup>5</sup> See, for examples, Fiorina (1989); Parker and Parker (1985); Yiannakis (1981); Cover and Brumberg (1981); Serra and Cover (1992); Fiorina and Rivers (1989). Johannes and McAdams (1981) have a dissenting perspective.

FIGURE 2  
PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND SHORT-TERM FORCES



conceptualized by Converse (1966). The slopes demonstrate the responsiveness of voters to short-term forces by showing how different groups of party identifiers will vary their vote for the candidate of their party in response to a political environment that is hostile to that candidate compared to how they can be expected to vote when the political environment of the election is positive. For example, 95 percent of strong Republican identifiers can be expected to vote for the Republican in an election environment that strongly favors the GOP, but a bit less than 70 percent will usually vote Republican when the environment strongly favors the Democrats. A comparison of the slopes for strong identifiers (Democrat and Republican) with the steeper slopes for weak and leaning identifiers (whether Democrat or Republican), and the still steeper slope for Independents, illustrates that party preference provides some insulation from the tide of an election but it does not immunize voters from these forces.

These influences are not an individual characteristic. They are not, for example, equivalent to a voter's approval of an incumbent. They are, rather, "hard" influences (government performance in foreign affairs, the condition of the economy, the reputation of the candidate at the top of the ticket, etc.) that can be separated from an individual voter's evaluation of them. Individual characteristics such as party identification will regulate the interpretation of "hard" events but it is the event that constitutes the short-term force that to some degree shapes the response of everybody—albeit some more than others (see Kramer 1983, for a detailed analysis of the distinction between perceptions and conditions as influences on individual behavior). These forces also have secondary effects independent of each individual voter's perceptions of them, shaping patterns of campaign finance and candidate emergence.

#### THE VARIABLE INCUMBENT ADVANTAGE

The personal vote component and the indirect advantages of incumbency (weaker challengers, more campaign funds) increase an individual's probability of voting for the incumbent beyond what would be expected from the voter's partisan disposition. Put differently, incumbency creates a positive short-term force that increases, per Figure 2, the likelihood that any given voter will support the Republican if s/he is incumbent and decreases the probability of a GOP vote if the incumbent is Democratic. However, the effect of incumbency on a voter is likely to be greatest when the short-term forces that define the political environment of the election (government performance in foreign affairs, the condition of the economy, the reputation of the candidate at the top of the ticket, etc.) are visible. Specifically, a pro-Democratic short-term force will increase the advantage of incumbency for Republican incumbents because it will work against GOP challengers who are "exposed" to these forces more fully than the incumbent; a pro-Republican short-term force will increase the advantage of incumbency for Democratic incumbents because it will work against Democratic challengers.

The preceding points suggest a *variable* incumbency effect on voters because their behavior in open-seats is likely to be more elastic. Open-seat voters usually have not voted for either candidate, they do not remember new roads, intercession with the bureaucracy, or speeches at the high school commencements—because these events never happened. In the absence of personal vote cues that anchor a predisposition for the incumbent, voters respond to party, issues of the moment, and whatever else is shaping the environment of the election overall. Although the

candidate choices of voters in open-seat contests are overwhelmingly shaped by party preference (as are the decisions of voters in incumbent races), open-seat voters are more responsive to election-specific short-term forces because incumbency variables are absent. Where personal vote considerations may balance off contrary short-term forces in a race with an incumbent, only partisanship is available to resist a short-term tide in an election without an incumbent.

As a result, the choices of voters will hew more closely to the party baseline more in open than in incumbent elections. The defection and reinforcement that favor incumbents in incumbent elections are near the limit of the typical voter's responsiveness to extra-party influences. The addition of another short-term influence (a popular top-of-the-ticket candidate, for example) in a race with an incumbent will produce a smaller net change in any given voter's choice than would be true in the absence of the incumbency anchor. The short-term force aspect of incumbency has produced most of the deviation from underlying partisanship that can be produced.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Expected Results*

Consequently, across a series of elections we expect voter choices in open-seat contests to be more variable, and we expect the magnitude of the deviation from partisanship to vary with the magnitude and direction of the short-term forces of the election. The influence of incumbency on voters will be diminished whenever the short-term forces are aiding the incumbent's party. For example, a Democratic tide will cause voters in open-seat Democratic constituencies to support the Democrat above what might have been expected from their party identification, diminishing the difference between the support provided by voters in open-seat races compared to the support provided by voters in incumbent races. In contrast, the influence of incumbency on voters in Democratic districts should be greatest when the tide favors the GOP. In this case, voters in open Democratic seats respond to the GOP tide with a vote that is close to what we would expect given their party identification. If our conceptualization of the effect of incumbency on voters is correct, three findings should emerge.

1. The incumbent advantage exists because voters in open-seat races cast a vote that is on average very close to what would have been expected from their partisanship, while the vote for incumbents exceeds the support expected by partisanship.
2. The difference between the support voters give incumbents and the vote that would be predicted from party

identification will be relatively stable compared to the difference between a purely partisan vote and the observed vote in open-seat races.

3. The effect of incumbency on voters will be smallest when the short-term force is aiding the party and largest when the short-term force is opposing the party.

This conceptualization of incumbency influences on voting differs from the *bonus model* of incumbency in the literature. Under the *bonus model*, voters are more inclined to support the incumbent over a non-incumbent at a relatively constant rate. Our *anchor model* suggests that the net effect of incumbency depends on the behavior of voters toward candidates in the open-seats. That is, minus the anchor of incumbency, voters in open-seat races vote more heavily for the successor candidate when the tide is favorable and less when the tide favors the other party. When the tide is with the incumbent's party, the effect of incumbency on vote choice is reduced; when the tide opposes the incumbent's party the effect of incumbency on the vote choice is increased because the vote of open-seat candidates of that party declines much more than the vote for incumbent candidates of the same party.

Previous work has not considered the systematic party difference of the impact of short-term national tides on incumbents in the same election. The resulting joint Republican and Democratic estimate of the incumbency advantages has, we suspect, contributed to an underestimation of the effect of incumbency on voters by averaging the large incumbent advantage associated with the party disadvantaged by short-term forces and the small incumbent advantage associated with the party benefiting from the short-term forces. Under-estimation is likely even when survey data are used to determine the impact of incumbency on voters because the typical election-specific analysis cannot separate out the net deviation of the vote from a norm that is independent of the parameters of the specific election. Also, analyses that do not distinguish the parties average the incumbent effect across the parties and mask the influence of the short-term forces.

#### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: THE ANALYSIS

The analysis is limited to the 1980 through 2000 period because the necessary data are not easily available prior to 1980. The design estimates the effect of incumbency on voters by comparing (1) open-seat with incumbent contests in (2) different political environments. All references to "open-seat candidates" should be understood to mean the candidate of the same party as the previous office-holder. Comparisons are always made between support for incumbents and open-seat candidates of that same party in any given year. This design is similar in conceptualization to previous work, especially surge-slump analyses, as it represents a comparison between voter's choices in incumbent and open-seat elections.

<sup>6</sup> "That can be produced" is an important qualification, resting on the well-demonstrated fact that party identification is a restraint on short-term forces that sway election outcomes. Incumbency affects voters whose partisanship is weak enough to be affected by it, leaving significantly less room for still other facts to shape the vote.

### The Variables

The dependent variable is the difference between the reported House vote and the vote that would be expected if party identifiers had voted as they “normally” do when short-term forces are in balance. What voters “normally” do is defined as the two-party division of the vote that is expected when short-term forces are in balance. As an out-of-sample estimate of typical party-based voting, it is not confounded by endogeneity or the data-fitting biases characteristic of any election-specific model of the vote; and it provides a benchmark against which an individual’s reported vote can be compared.

The vertical line in Figure 2 identifies the normal vote for each group of partisans.<sup>7</sup> The numerical value of the dependent variable is calculated as the arithmetic difference between a binary coding of the respondent’s vote (where 1 indicates a Democratic vote) minus the expected vote based on partisanship (the “normal Democratic vote” of strong Democratic identifiers, weak Democratic identifiers, and so forth), which is a probability that ranges from .18 to .85 (see Petrocik 1989). To be sure, there is some correlation between expressed partisanship and election-specific influences on the vote (Fiorina 1981, MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989). However, the overwhelming component of party identification is a pre-existing identity (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) that is stable and normally susceptible to only small change; the much smaller component reflects short-term evaluations. And although endogeneity might cause an over-estimate of the unique party component of the vote, it should not bias an estimate of the influence of incumbency on voters since election-specific influences on partisanship should be approximately equal in open-seat and incumbent contests.

There are two *independent* variables. The first distinguishes whether voters are choosing in a contest that involves an incumbent. The second characterizes the election environment in terms of whether it favors the Democrats or the Republicans. Standard indicators of the election environment: the job approval rating of the incumbent president, the winner of the presidential election, and the condition of the economy are used to differentiate the elections (see Campbell 1993, and Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992 for a full treatment). The measure of short-term forces in each election is a trichotomous classification of the eleven elections as favoring the Democrats, favoring the Republicans, and favoring neither. Although relatively crude, it allows valid and reliable distinctions of environments that are, on

balance, pro-Democratic from those that are pro-GOP, with a residual category for elections in which neither party is obviously favored. By these criteria the elections of 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1994 are regarded as favoring the Republicans. The elections of 1982, 1990, 1992, and 1996 are scored as having a pro-Democratic environment. The 1986, 1998, and 2000 contests are regarded as substantially balanced (see Appendix 1 for more detail on this coding).

### THE RESULTS: THE INFLUENCE OF INCUMBENCY ON VOTERS

Figure 3 plots the basic data that provide an estimate of the influence of incumbency (and all it typically includes) on voters from 1980 through 2000. Each graph plots two lines: the reported vote of the respondents and the vote that might have been expected given the respondents’ partisanship in the absence of short-term forces (the “normal vote”). The top graphs present data for Democratic seats; the lower graphs present data for Republican seats.<sup>8</sup>

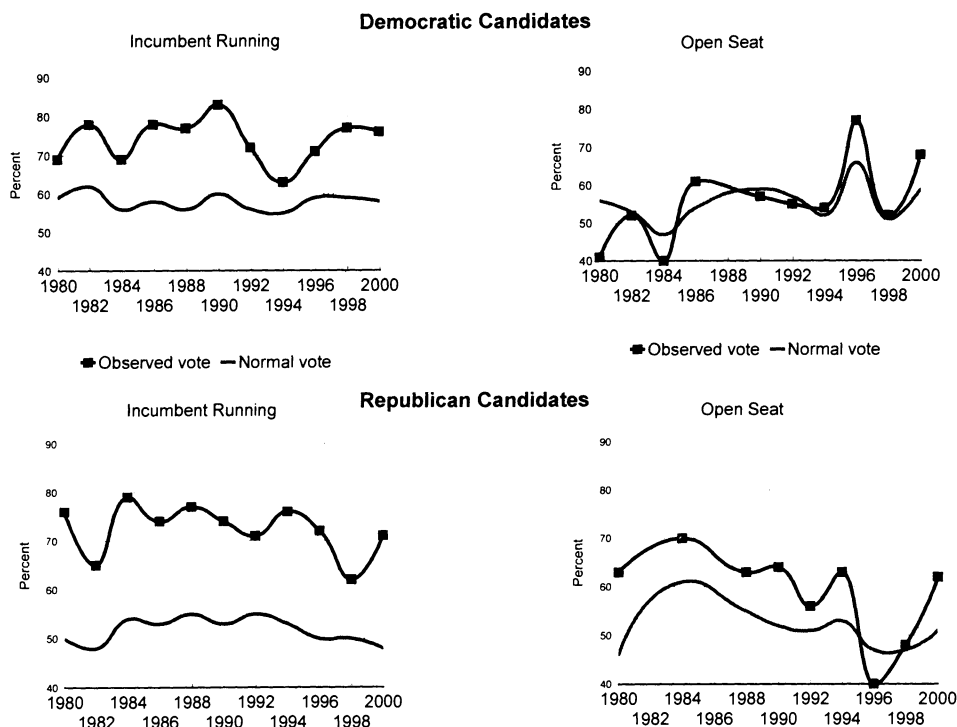
Several features of the incumbent’s advantage are apparent. First, the partisan basis of an incumbent’s electoral security is obvious. A majority of the respondents in incumbent and open-seat races have a party preference that matches the party of the current or previous office-holder. Respondents in districts represented by a Democrat seeking re-election (the upper left graph) had an average, expected 57 percent Democratic vote. Respondents in open Democratic seats (upper right) had a party identification that would have yielded a 54 percent expected Democratic vote. Those in districts where a Republican sought re-election (lower left graph) had an expected 54 percent Republican vote; those in seats where a Republican was retiring (lower right) had an average 53 percent expected GOP vote. In brief, incumbents and would-be successors in open-seat races faced electorates of partisan supporters.

Figure 3 also indicates that voters supported incumbents at a rate that exceeded their underlying party vote by a significantly larger margin than it exceeded partisanship in open-seat races (indicated by the difference between the reported choices of voters and the vote expected from partisanship alone). They voted for Democratic incumbents an average of 16 points more than expected, but gave Democrats in Democratic open-seats a vote that was 2 points less (on average) than their partisanship predicted. Put differently, voters in Democrat seats were approximately 18 points more likely to support the Democrat when he (or she) was the incumbent. The pattern is virtually identical for races in GOP seats. Voters in these races supported Republican incumbents about 19 points more than expected given their party identification but only five points more when the seat was open (giving a 14 point incumbency effect).

<sup>7</sup> The vertical line intercepts the slopes to indicate the probable Democratic vote for each class of party identifiers. The probabilities are: .85 for strong Democratic identifiers, .31 for weak and leaning Democrats, .48 for Independents, .29 for leaning Republicans, .27 for weak Republicans, and .82 for strong Republican identifiers. The values were re-estimated by Petrocik (1989) with a dataset of 151 surveys conducted for a variety of elections (presidential, Senatorial, gubernatorial, and legislative). See Petrocik (1989) for a full account of the estimation of these values.

<sup>8</sup> A Democratic seat is one in which either the incumbent seeking re-election is a Democrat or the previous holder of the seat was a Democrat. A Republican seat is one in which either the incumbent seeking re-election is a Republican or the previous holder of the seat was a Republican.

FIGURE 3  
OBSERVED AND EXPECTED VOTE IN INCUMBENT AND OPEN SEAT RACES



### The Varying Advantage

Figure 4 illustrates the election-specific variability of the effect of incumbency on voters by graphing the *difference* between the observed and expected vote for incumbent and open-seat races. The upper graph reports the difference between the reported and expected choices of respondents in districts with a Democratic incumbent and those in open-seat races. The bottom graph reports the differential for voters in GOP districts.

Consider the two left-most points in the top graph. Voters were 13 points *more* likely to vote for the incumbent Democrat than their partisanship predicted in 1980 (point on the upper line), and that they voted 13 points *less* for the Democrat seeking to succeed a retiring Democrat than was predicted from their partisanship. The 26-point difference is the effect of a Democrat's incumbency on voters in 1980. On average, the open-seat line is closer to zero than the incumbent line, illustrating our first proposition: The incumbent advantage exists because voters in open-seat races cast a vote that is on average very close to what would have been expected from their partisanship, while the vote for incumbents exceeds the support expected by partisanship. The overall incumbent advantage averages 18 points for Democrats and 14 points for GOP incumbents.

### Short-term Effects on the Incumbent's Advantage

Figure 4 demonstrates the considerable variation of this differential. The variability that is a function of the party

bias of the environment of the election can be expressed formally. Specifically, we can test whether the interactions of short-term forces with the presence of an incumbent has the expected effect.

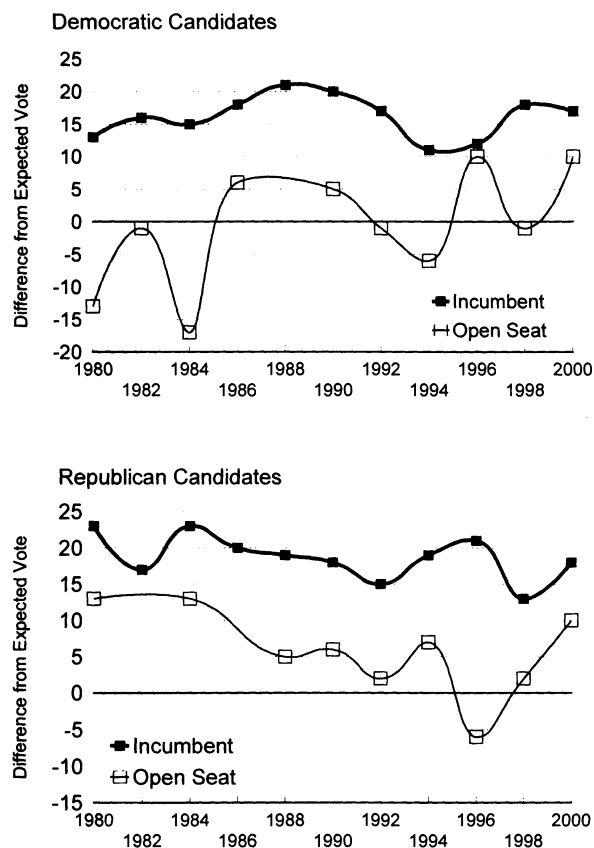
In the simple *bonus model* with no short-term forces (STFs), the vote, net of partisanship, is simply a function of incumbency. Specifically:  $Y_{ip} = a_p + b_p * (\text{incumbency}) + e_{ip}$ . In this naïve "bonus" model, the effect of incumbency on voters is at its most extreme, providing a guaranteed bonus ( $b_p$ ) above a constant expected vote. In the *anchor model* of incumbency, the impact of STFs on the voter is moderated by incumbency status: it has one value for incumbents and a different value for open-seat successor candidates. Specifically:  $Y_i = a_p + b_p * (\text{Incumbent}) + c_{yp} * \text{Open} * \text{STF}_{ip} + d_{yp} * \text{Incumbent} * \text{STF}_{ip} + e_{ip}$ . We expect the STF interactions to affect voters differently depending on whether they are facing an incumbent or an open-seat candidate. It will have a smaller influence on voters where an incumbent is one of the candidates.

There are several ways to model this effect. One conventional approach specifies as independent variables party identification and a series of interactions of the year of the election with the incumbent/open-seat status of the race.<sup>9</sup> This approach tests whether the incumbent's advantage in that year is atypical. But a more conceptually rich approach categorizes elections according to criteria that define the political environment (incumbent approval, and so forth)

<sup>9</sup> This results of this estimation are available from either author.



FIGURE 4  
THE INCUMBENT ADVANTAGE



and uses the resulting variable to examine whether it has the postulated effect on voter choices. Rather than over-fit short-term forces, we choose to explicitly estimate their effect with a more parsimonious model in order to test whether the variability in the incumbency advantage is linked to an independent (and, for predictive purposes, prior) classification of elections in terms of whether they have characteristics that constitute a political environment with a distinctive bias that will favor candidates from one of the parties.

The short-term forces will influence candidate recruitment, fund-raising, and the several factors that extensive research has identified as the consequence of the political environment and the immediate influence on election outcomes (see Jacobson and Kernell's 1981 classic statement of this). For this reason, we do not include such factors as campaign spending because they are endogenous products of the short-term bias (and a partial expression of it). We recognize that variations in resources may have a marginal influence on a citizen's vote, *ceteris paribus*. However, the conceptual task at hand is to demonstrate that the short-term political environment (which should be subject to estimation by a knowledgeable observer, see Appendix 1) will effect how strongly incumbency influences individual voters.

The formulation presented here, therefore, interacts the seat status with the election environment measure described

above, against a vote variable that is adjusted for the candidate choice that is typically a product of the individual's party identification (essentially as it would be adjusted in a two-stage model). The hypothesis that the short-term forces of the election shape the incumbent's influence on voters requires significant coefficients for the interaction terms. The hypothesis that the size of the advantage depends on the effect of short-term forces on voters in open-seat races requires the open-seat-STF interaction to exceed the incumbent-STF interaction.

Table 1 presents the results. The probability (net of the vote typically associated with the respondent's party identification) that a voter will support the incumbent increases when the short-term forces of the election year are positive for the incumbent's party. The vote for a Democratic incumbent swings an average of just under two percentage points between a bad and a good election environment ( $-.009$  to  $+.009 = .018$ ). The vote for the GOP incumbent can swing over 4 points ( $-.02$  to  $.02 = .04$ ). However, the effect of short-term forces is significantly stronger for successor candidates in open-seat races, both of which can be expected to swing more than eight percentage points between good and bad election environments. The result summarizes the differences in Figure 3: In any election the advantage an incumbent receives depends on the election environment. When the environment is negative, voters provide slightly less than a party vote for Democratic successor-candidates; they have provided slightly more than an essentially party vote to open-seat Republican successor candidates. When the election environment is positive, voters are substantially more supportive of successor candidates than we would have expected from party identification alone.

Incumbency seems to serve Democrats better than it does Republicans. Voters are about five percentage point more likely to vote for the Democratic incumbent than they are to vote for the GOP incumbent, net of everything else (.181 versus .130), and voters were less influenced by short-term forces when they had a Democratic incumbents than when their member of Congress was a Republican. From bad to good election environments, the probability of a respondent voting for the Democratic incumbent increased less than two points ( $.009 * -1$  compared to  $.009 * 1$ ); the willingness of voters to support Republicans varied more than 4 points between good (1980, 1984, 1988, and 1994) and bad (1982, 1990, 1992, and 1996) election environments.

These effects are averages; short-term forces were particularly strong in some years. For example, in 1980, open-seat Democrats slipped down .26; incumbents fell only .05. In 1988, open-seat Democrats surged .12; incumbents only rose .04. The pattern is consistent for almost all election years—whatever the direction of the short-term force, voters where incumbent Democrats ran responded much less to that force than did voters in open-seat Democratic districts. In 1986, voters in Republican open-seats voted .18 more Republican, while voters constrained by incumbency only barely move, voting just .02 more Republican. In 1992, support for Republicans in open seats slipped down  $-.07$

≡ TABLE 1  
THE EFFECT OF SHORT-TERM FORCES AND INCUMBENCY ON VOTERS

	Democratic Districts			Republican Districts		
	Coef	SE	Prob	Coef	SE	Prob
Constant	-.023	.015	.12	.062	.019	.001
Incumbent	.181	.016	.00	.130	.020	.000
STF*Open Seat	-.042	.016	.01	.042	.021	.041
STF*Incumbent	-.009	.006	.14	.020	.007	.005
F(3,5120) = 44.6			F(3,3725) = 20.0			

while voter support for incumbents declined only three points. The pattern is not equally strong for all years, or for both parties, but it is visible in all of them (year by year data are not shown).

The pattern repeats itself irrespective of a respondent's strength of party identification. Table 2 reports the standard deviations of the predicted probabilities of voting Democratic for every category of partisanship, in open-seat and incumbent races, when the district is Republican and Democrat. In every case, the variability of the vote in open-seats exceeds its variability in races when an incumbent is running. Variability is a moderate function of partisanship: strong partisans exhibit less open-seat variance than weak and leaning partisans. Independents are more likely than partisans to switch their vote in open-seat contests in response to short-term forces (and the difference is not statistically significant).

Clearly, from the perspective of Tables 1 and 2, the incumbency advantage is shaped by the greater impact of short-term forces of the decisions of voters in open-seat races. Incumbency anchors voters by limiting their reaction to the party bias of the election environment. The vote in open-seat races is much more affected, a finding which corresponds to election outcomes after a redistricting or an incumbent's retirement.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have explored incumbency from voters' perspectives, finding a larger and more variable incumbency advantage than reported in district-level analyses of incumbency. Controlling for party identification, voters have been about 17 points more likely to support the incumbent than one would have predicted from their party identification, while support for successor candidates in open-seat races exceeds a straight party vote by only about 3 points. Overall, between 1980 and 2000 voters were about 14 percentage points more likely to support an incumbent. Democratic incumbency may have a slightly bigger impact on voters (at 18 percentage points) than did GOP incumbency (13 percentage points).

More important, we found systematic variation in the magnitude of the incumbency advantage in three ways. First, the incumbent's advantage for voters varied among elections as a function of the support given to open-seat candidates. Voters always support incumbents more heavily than one would expect from their partisanship, but voters in open-seat races cast more than a partisan vote in some years but not in others. The net effect of incumbency on voters, therefore, depended on how much the vote for candidates in open-seat races departed from partisanship.

≡ TABLE 2  
VARIANCE IN OPEN AND INCUMBENT SEAT VOTING, 1980-2000

Voter's party identification	District Type			
	Republican		Democrat	
	Open	Incumbent	Open	Incumbent
Strong Democrat	0.12	0.05	0.06	0.01
Weak Democrat	0.15	0.06	0.12	0.02
Lean Democrat	0.14	0.06	0.13	0.03
Independent	0.13	0.04	0.17	0.05
Lean Republican	0.08	0.02	0.16	0.07
Weak Republican	0.06	0.02	0.16	0.07
Strong Republican	0.03	0.01	0.11	0.05
Column average	0.10	0.04	0.13	0.04

Note: The table entries are the standard deviations of the means of the predicted probability of the vote for incumbents and open-seat successor candidates from 1980 through 2000.

Second, there is also a party difference. In Republican open-seat races, the vote exceeded a straight party vote in every election except 1996 (where Republican successor candidates were under-supported) and 1998 (where the vote seemed wholly partisan). Voter choices in open Democrat seats were less predictable. In five elections, they cast a mostly party identification-based vote for Democratic successor candidates, in two elections they under-supported the Democrat, and in three elections they voted more heavily for the Democrat than we would have expected from their party identification.

Finally, the influence of short-term forces is regular enough to conclude that the election environment moderates the incumbent's advantage. That is, while there is an average influence of incumbency on voter choices, it has variability that correlates with the magnitude and direction of short-term forces as they would be perceived by a contemporaneous observer. A short-term forces explanation does not fit every election. The 1990 and 1992 elections, arguably good elections for the Democrats, did not dispose much additional support for open-seat Democrats. The increase in support for Republicans running in open-seats in 1998 is also contrary to the general pattern. However, the pattern is generally consistent enough to support a strong generalization.

Some caveats are in order. Respondents' might misreport their vote in favor of the winner in a way would overestimate their greater inclination to vote for incumbents. However, we are inclined to believe that this effect is not so large (if it exists) as to undermine our results. Bandwagon effects should not be that much larger for an incumbent than they are for a open-seat winner simply because the voters most influenced by bandwagons are those marginally interested in politics, and we would expect them to be equally influ-

enced by the short-term forces that aid the open-seat winner. Further, if bandwagon effects aided the incumbents, we would not expect the vote for the open-seat candidates to vary more strongly with the short-term forces measure - as it does in the data.

Also, no overestimation should occur by virtue of the correlation between the number of open seats and the direction and magnitude of the short-term forces. The analysis does not deal with the *number* of seats that come open, but with the *deviation from baseline partisan behavior of the voters* in open-seats compared to the *deviation from baseline partisan behavior of the voters* in incumbent seats. It is possible that the forces that lead to the retirements or primary defeats that create an open seat carry through to the general election. However, that fact does not change our central findings that the behavior of voters in open-seats responds the most to short-term forces and that the incumbency advantage varies with the greater responsiveness of voters in open-seat contests.

Overall, the pattern suggests the utility of thinking of the incumbency advantage as an "anchor" that allows voters to resist the pull of election-specific issues and personalities. Incumbents receive a personal vote that puts their support from voters somewhere near its maximum (some partisans of the opposing party can never be persuaded to support the incumbent). Open-seat successor candidates on the other hand, have a possibility for expanding their vote beyond the partisanship of the electorate for several reasons, but, in particular, when the short-term forces in the election are a "wind at their back." In these latter cases, the incumbent's advantage among voters declines because the successor candidates get a boost that does not help incumbents who are near their maximum vote. The anchor model suggested above seems like an appropriate description for this variability.

### ≡ APPENDIX 1

#### THE PARTY BIAS OF SHORT-TERM FORCES IN THE ELECTIONS

Year	Individual Factors			Summary Short-Term Forces Favor which Party
	Incumbent President's Approval Favors	Presidential Election Winner	Condition of the Economy Favors	
1980	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans
1982	Neither	NA	Democrats	Democrats
1984	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans
1986	Neither	NA	Rep/Neither	Rep/Neither
1988	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans	Republicans
1990	Neither	NA	Democrats	Democrats
1992	Democrats	Democrats	Democrats	Democrats
1994	Republicans	NA	Democrats	Neither
1996	Democrats	Democrats	Democrats	Democrats
1998	Neither	NA	Democrats	Neither
2000	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Neither

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petrocik@missouri.edu