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Television Markets And Congressional Elections

This research examines the effects of the relative congruence of congressional districts and television markets on congressional elections. We consider propositions concerning the voters' information about and evaluations of the candidates, drawing on data from the U.S. Census, the Nielsen Station Index, and the CPS 1980 National Election Study. The findings indicate that market/district congruence increases voter information about, exposure to, and familiarity with congressional candidates. This increase in information works to the challengers' advantage and results in challengers receiving a greater share of the vote in congruent than in incongruent districts. Congressional incumbents derive electoral benefits in direct proportion to the incongruence of their district and television markets.

Most recent research on the use of television in political campaigns examines the impact of politicians, journalists, and citizens on the quality of political communication (Patterson, 1980; McGinnis, 1969; Patterson and McClure, 1976; Graber, 1980; Hofstetter, 1976). Relatively little attention has been paid to structural problems and in particular to the problems that arise from the geographic structure of television markets. The subject of this research is the relative geographical congruence of congressional districts with the television markets that serve them and the effects of various degrees of congruence on the political information, attitudes, and behavior of voters.

When the boundaries of a television market and a district differ, political advertising is inefficient and political communication in general is impeded. In an incongruent district, candidates are either unable to communicate easily with everyone in their district or are forced to communicate with many voters residing in neighboring districts. Congressional districts in the heart of New York City illustrate the problem. If a candidate in one of these districts wants to send a campaign message by television to the voters in his district, he must send the message to the voters of 38 other districts as well. Obviously the expense and the waste of this incongruence severely restricts the candidate's use of television and probably limits the political learning of the district's electorate; it may also reduce the coverage given to a campaign

by television journalists. In television markets that encompass several districts, journalists cannot afford to cover each district as if it were the only district in the area. They must divide their attention and air-time among the several districts. Moreover, since a congressional contest is of interest primarily to viewers living within a particular district, local newscasts will be disinclined to give significant coverage to any single district contest.

Circumstances should be quite different in congruent districts. When district and television market boundaries more neatly overlap, candidates can efficiently reach their desired audience through political advertising and journalists can focus their attention on a single contest of potential interest to their entire audience. In a congruent district the campaign is more newsworthy to journalists, and political advertising is cost effective for candidates. In short, congruence should encourage an efficient flow of information from both journalists and candidates to the voters.

Both Robinson (1975) and Jacobson (1975; 1983, pp. 62-63) speculate about the general problem of incongruence for congressional contests. Robinson argues that, "for the candidates in the House, the cost of television is an unusual extravagance. . . . [F]or most congressional candidates the local station has a potential audience that is usually too big to be useful. . . . To buy time is to waste money" (1975, p. 246). This observation receives added support from Rothschild (1978). His analysis indicates that, given equal campaign expenditures, candidates from congruent districts may purchase as much as 30 times the televised political advertising of candidates in incongruent districts.

Mann (1978, p. 29) examines the impact of congruence on the voters' recall of candidate names. Categorizing districts as having good, fair, or poor media access, he finds that the proportion of voters who can recall the candidates' names increases as media access or congruence increases. Taking this a step further, Luttbeg (forthcoming) examines the impact of market/district congruence on election outcomes. Although he does not find a substantial direct impact of congruence on election outcomes, Luttbeg nonetheless concludes that the combination of solid campaign financing and market/district congruence can improve a challenger's chances of defeating an incumbent.

Two Propositions About Market/District Congruence

This research investigates two propositions. The first concerns the general impact of congruence on the electorate's exposure to and familiarity with congressional candidates.

Proposition I: The general candidate proposition. Voters in districts that are congruent with television markets are more likely to see their

congressional candidates on television and thus be more familiar with those candidates than voters in districts that are incongruent with television markets.

The second proposition concerns the impact of congruence on the electorate's exposure to, familiarity with, and preference for incumbents and challengers. This proposition has two parts.

Proposition II: The challenger advantage proposition. First, the increased television exposure and the corresponding increased familiarity which result from running in a congruent rather than in an incongruent district tend to be a greater advantage for challengers than for incumbents.

Second, challengers should win a greater share of the vote in congruent districts than in incongruent districts. Conversely, incumbents should win a greater share of the vote in incongruent districts than in congruent districts.

Although television exposure and candidate familiarity should increase in more congruent districts for all candidates, the increase of exposure and familiarity may not necessarily benefit both incumbents and challengers equally. Incumbents, because of their generally greater prominence and larger campaign warchests, can achieve some measure of attention even in incongruent districts. With the greater information flow in congruent districts, the incumbents' prominence and campaign finances are less important. Thus, congruent districts allow challengers to narrow the exposure gap. With the incumbents' exposure advantage narrowed, their familiarity advantage should likewise be narrowed.

The reduction of the incumbents' exposure and familiarity advantages in congruent districts has implications for the vote. If voters have more information to work with, as they should in congruent districts, they may find a reason to vote for the challenger. Incongruent districts, on the other hand, ought to be to the liking of incumbents. In such information-poor environments, incumbents should be able to control much of the information that reaches voters. They should benefit at the polls accordingly.

Data and Measures

The data for this study are from the 1980 CPS National Election Survey. Exposure is measured from a question concerning the respondent's recollection of having seen a candidate on television. Familiarity is measured from the respondents' recognition of the candidates' names.[1] Three variables are generated from each of these measures—one for the incumbent, one for the challenger, and one for the difference between the incumbent and the challenger. The incumbent and challenger variables are coded as dummy variables, with 1 indicating exposure to or familiarity with the candidate. The difference variables were computed by subtracting the challenger variable from the incumbent variable.

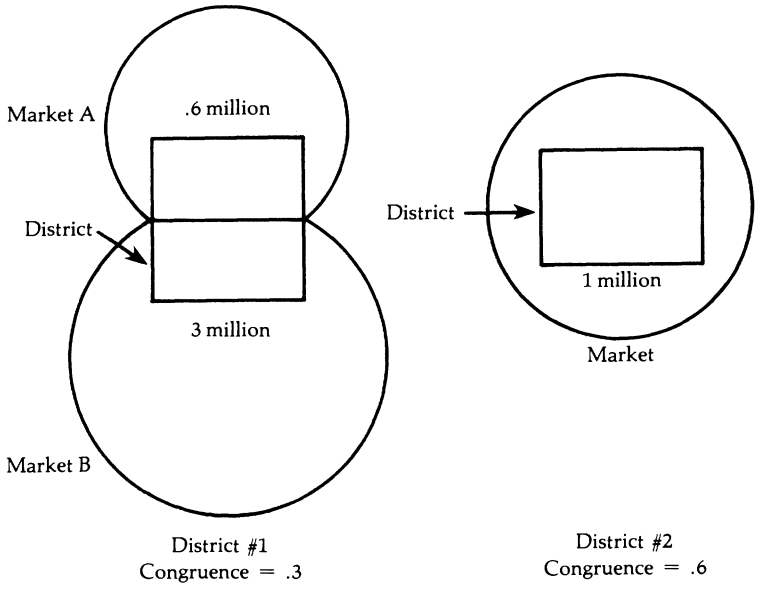
The final dependent variable is the vote. The simplest form of this measure is reported vote choice (scored 1 for incumbent, 0 for challenger). A similarly scored second variable, respondent preference, combines preferences of both voters and nonvoters. The third measure of the vote is the aggregate vote in the district.

The primary independent variable is a measure of the degree to which the boundaries of a given congressional district coincide with those of the local television market. Because the dependent variables are from the 1980 CPS National Election Survey, the congruence index is computed only for the sample of 108 congressional districts covered by that survey.[2] The Nielsen Station Index designates the counties that fall within each television broadcast market or "dominant market area." A county is part of a given dominant market area if more than 50 percent of the television viewing in that county is associated with the stations in the television market. For the congressional district boundaries we used *Congressional Districts in the 1970s* (1974) to code what counties and portions of counties constituted each district. In addition, census data on county and district populations are used in a weighting procedure described below.

Deriving a single index of congruence between a district and the related television market(s) is complicated by the fact that incongruence can result from two quite distinct patterns. The simplest pattern is a district entirely subsumed by a television market. The smaller the district in relation to the encompassing market, the lower the congruence. In the other pattern a television market covers only a portion of a congressional district, with the remainder of the district either not covered, or covered by one or more other markets. In this case an index of congruence must reflect the degree of congruence between the portion of the district covered by each market and the total market area, as well as reflecting what proportion of the district is not covered at all. Where multiple markets intersect the district, there must also be some method of weighting and combining these various proportions into a single index.

For a district subsumed by a single television market, we computed the degree of congruence by dividing the total market population into the district population. The resulting index reflects the proportion of the market contained in the district. A value of one reflects perfect congruence, the upper limit of the index; a value of zero is the lower limit. Between these limits, the higher the index value the closer the district and television market are to being congruent. The actual values of the congruence index for the 108 districts are presented in the Appendix, ranging from a very incongruent .026 in New York's 25th district to an almost perfectly congruent .964 in New York's 30th district.

FIGURE 1
Two Hypothetical Cases of Congruence



For districts partially covered by a television market, we computed an index value by an extension of the above logic. The procedure requires two steps. First, for each of the intersections between a market and a district, we computed a separate congruence index, dividing the population of each covered portion of the district by the population of the appropriate intersecting television market. In the second step we weighted these individual index values according to the population of their respective portions of the district, summed the resulting figures, and divided by the total district population. The resulting index value has the same range and general properties as the above simple index. In fact, the simple index is a special case of this more general index, in which there is only one market-district intersection and the portion of the district covered equals the total district population.

A few examples should demonstrate how the index is computed. As illustrated in Figure 1, the first district has a population of 600,000 and half its population is covered by television market A, the other half by market B. The total population covered by market A, including the area outside the district, is 600,000; the total for market B is 3,000,000. Since market A includes half the district's population, its intersection population is 300,000.

When this figure is divided by the market B population of 3,000,000, the resulting index value of .10 indicates that this portion of the district composes only one-tenth of television market B. To compute the overall congruence index, each of the two index values is weighted by the portion of the district they account for, these weighted values are summed, and the resulting figure is divided by total district population. In this case .50 (the A index value) is multiplied by 300,000 and yields 150,000; .10 (the B index value) is multiplied by 300,000 and yields 30,000; the two weighted values are added, to yield 180,000 and divided by 600,000 for an overall index value of .30. As this example shows, the index reflects two things: the degree of congruence within each of the market portions in the district and the relative size of these market portions.

Where a district is subsumed by a television market the computation of the index is a degenerative case of the above general procedure. The second district also has a population of 600,000 but is completely covered by a market with a population of 1,000,000. The intersection population, in this case the entire district of 600,000, is divided by the market population of 1,000,000 for an index value of .60. This index value is weighted by its portion of the district population (600,000) yielding 360,000, summed with the other portions (in this case there are none), and divided by the total district population (600,000) to yield a final index value of .60.

These two cases also illustrate how congruence, as measured by our index, ought to affect candidates' ability to communicate with constituents. If a candidate wanted to communicate efficiently with voters, he or she would be much better off running in our second district than in our first district. In the second district, a candidate reaches two nonconstituents for every three constituents, producing an index or ratio of constituents to total market audience of .6. In neither section of the first district can a candidate communicate to constituents this efficiently. In the market A section of the first district the candidate reaches one nonconstituent for every constituent and in the market B section the situation is far worse, reaching ten nonconstituents for every one constituent.

The analysis of the possible effects of congruence is conducted at the district level. The independent variable is congruence, measured on the index just described. The dependent variables are the district means for exposure, familiarity, and vote, from the survey data mentioned earlier. These district means are supplemented by the actual aggregate vote in each district.

Findings

If congruence has any effect, it should provide candidates with a greater opportunity to use television to communicate with voters through political advertising and local newscasts. There should be a positive relationship

TABLE 1
Impact of Congruence on Exposure and Recognition of Congressional Candidates

Dependent Variable	Intercept	b	beta	R^2	(N)
Incumbent Exposure	.19	.89[b]	.59	.35	(84)
Challenger Exposure	−.02	.88[b]	.70	.49	(83)
Incumbent Recognition	.75	.26[b]	.31	.09	(84)
Challenger Recognition	.30	.61[b]	.44	.19	(83)
Difference between Incumbent and Challenger Exposure	.22	.02	.02	.00	(83)
Difference between Incumbent and Challenger Recognition	.44	−.35[a]	−.26	.07	(83)

[a] $p < .05$.

[b] $p < .01$.

between congruence and the likelihood that constituents see the candidates on television. The data are unambiguous on this point: constituents in congruent districts stand a better chance of seeing their congressional candidates on television than constituents in incongruent districts. The findings are presented in Table 1.

The effect of congruence on the exposure of candidates to the public is observed for both incumbents and challengers. Moreover, the effect is quite strong in each case.[3] The impact of congruence is clearest if we compare a typically incongruent district to a typically congruent district. The coefficients presented in Table 1 can be used to estimate exposure levels for a district at the first quartile of the congruence index distribution (i.e., having a higher congruence value than 25 percent of the districts), where the index value is .07, and a district at the third quartile (i.e., having a higher congruence value than 75 percent of the districts), where the index value is .37. Estimates of the level of exposure in these two districts are presented in Table 2. In the high congruence district, both incumbents and challengers are seen by 27 percent more of the public than in a low congruence district. Obviously, congruence makes a substantial difference in candidate exposure.

Congruence affects familiarity much as it affects media exposure. As is evident in Table 2, the greater the congruence of television market and congressional district, the greater the likelihood that voters will recognize the candidates. The effects of congruence on familiarity are quite strong,

TABLE 2
Expected Exposure and Recognition Levels of Congressional Candidates In Low and High Congruence Districts
(in percentages)

Dependent Variable	Low Congruence District[a]	High Congruence District[b]	Ratio High/Low[c]
Incumbent Exposure	25	52	2.08
Challenger Exposure	4	31	7.75
Incumbent Recognition	77	85	1.10
Challenger Recognition	34	53	1.56

[a]District at the first quartile of congruence distribution; index value equals .07.

[b]District at the third quartile of congruence distribution; index value equals .37.

[c]The proportionate gain in moving from the low congruence district to the high congruence district.

though not as strong as the effects on exposure. Since voters may become acquainted with the candidates through routes other than television, the slightly weaker effects of congruence on familiarity are understandable. The impact of congruence can best be gauged by what it means to the familiarity of candidates in our low and high congruence districts. In the high congruence district, incumbents increase their recognition by 8 percentage points and challengers increase their recognition by 19 percentage points over the low congruence districts.

Table 1 presented the initial evidence for our second proposition, the challenger advantage proposition. The first aspect of this proposition concerns candidate exposure. As the nearly zero unstandardized coefficient for the difference between challenger and incumbent exposure indicates, the exposure increase for challengers parallels the exposure increase for incumbents. However, the fact that the exposure gap is nearly constant does not mean that it is neutral: challengers have a greater proportionate increase in exposure than incumbents. As Table 2 shows, incumbents double their exposure in the high congruence districts. While this is certainly a substantial increase, challengers increase their exposure by nearly eight times in these high congruence districts. From a different perspective, incumbents have a better than six-to-one exposure advantage over challengers in low congruence districts (25 percent vs. 4 percent) but less than a two-to-one advantage in high congruence districts (52 percent vs. 31 percent).

TABLE 3
Impact of Congruence on the Incumbents' Electoral Advantage

Dependent Variable	Intercept	b	beta	R^2	(N)
Reported Vote for Incumbent	.78	$-.26^a$	-.22	.05	(84)
Reported Preference for Incumbent	.79	$-.25^a$	-.21	.05	(84)
Actual Vote Totals for Incumbent	.74	$-.26^b$	-.43	.18	(84)

[a] $p < .05$.

[b] $p < .01$.

In the case of candidate recognition, challengers benefit in both an absolute and a proportionate sense from greater congruence. The absolute benefit to challengers is indicated in Table 1, in the significant coefficient for the recognition difference variable. According to the values for the recognition levels in Table 2, incumbents gain 8 percentage points in recognition between low and high congruence districts, while challengers gain 18 percentage points. Thus, from a low to a high congruence district, incumbents increase their level of recognition by a factor of 1.1, while challengers increase their level of recognition by a factor of 1.56. From a different perspective, incumbents enjoy a better than two-to-one recognition advantage over challengers in low congruence districts (77 percent vs. 34 percent) but much less than a two-to-one advantage in high congruence districts (85 percent vs. 53 percent).

We now examine the effect of congruence on voting. Given the greater exposure and recognition advantage of incumbents in low congruence districts, we expect that incumbents benefit from relatively low levels of congruence. The evidence is presented in Table 3. In each case the estimated effect of congruence is in the expected direction, statistically significant, and substantial. Moreover, the unstandardized coefficients are all quite similar.[4] The effects of congruence on the vote can again be demonstrated if we compare our low congruence district to our high congruence district (see Table 4). In the actual vote, the typical incumbent received 72 percent in the low congruence district but dropped to 64 percent in the high congruence district, a difference of 8 percentage points.[5] For the reported vote and reported preference, the differences were 8 percentage points and 7 percentage points respectively. This is clearly an impact of some consequence. It is on the same order as the widely discussed effects of incumbency advantage (Erikson, 1971) and aggregate economic conditions (Hibbing and Alford, 1981).

TABLE 4
Expected Incumbent Advantage in Vote Choice
In Low and High Congruence District
(in percentages)

Dependent Variable	Low Congruence District[a]	High Congruence District[b]
Reported Vote for Incumbent	76	68
Reported Preference for Incumbent	77	70
Actual Vote Totals for Incumbent	72	64

[a]District at the first quartile of congruence distribution; index value equals .07.

[b]District at the third quartile of congruence distributions; index value equals .37.

Conclusion

The structure of television markets and their relation to congressional districts makes a difference. The congruence of television markets and congressional districts increases the candidates' exposure to the public and the public's familiarity with the candidates and ultimately affects the public's vote. Although congruence increases the exposure and the familiarity of both incumbents and challengers, it is not neutral. Congruence benefits challengers. In a comparison of congruent and incongruent districts, we have shown that challengers gain disproportionately in media exposure and in their familiarity to the voters in the congruent district. The end product of these greater proportionate gains is that challengers tend to win a larger share of the vote in congruent districts.

The incumbent advantage in incongruent districts may be related to two more general observations about congressional elections. First, incumbents in the House are considerably safer than those in the Senate (Hinckley, 1981, p. 40). House districts are typically incongruent with their media markets and, as we now know, this poses a serious problem for challengers. States, on the other hand, are probably a good deal more congruent. This ought to facilitate more serious challenges to incumbents.

Second, incumbents in the House have been somewhat safer since the mid-1960s (Erikson, 1971; Mayhew, 1974), about the time that the political use of television became widespread. The growth of television-oriented congressional campaigning might well have benefited incumbents at the expense of challengers, given the typically incongruent nature of House districts. However, only a longitudinal study of congressional campaigning and market/district congruence could be conclusive on this point.

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NOTES

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1. The propositions were also examined with a different measure of familiarity: the respondents' ability to recall the candidates' names rather than to recognize their names. The results do not differ substantially when the recall measure is used.

2. The actual number of districts in the analysis falls below the total of 108. Since we are studying incumbents and challengers, we exclude districts which had open seats. This reduces the sample to 102 districts. We further excluded districts in which the incumbent ran without opposition, thus reducing the sample to 84 districts. In some cases the sample size is further reduced by missing values for individual questions.

3. We also tested the equations with party identification as a control variable. This change in specification did not alter any of the findings.

4. Although the unstandardized coefficients are nearly identical for the reported vote, reported preference, and actual vote, the proportion of explained variance and the level of significance are greater for the actual vote. This is precisely what one would expect, since reported vote and reported preference are calculated from small samples (about 13 respondents per district) while actual vote is based on the universe of voters in each district. The lower intercept for the actual vote equation may be due to the proincumbent bias in the 1980 CPS survey (Eubank and Gow, 1983).

5. It has been suggested to the authors that campaign spending is in some way involved in the relationship between congruence and the vote. In particular it has been suggested that the observed effects of congruence on the vote may be spurious, a reflection of the relationship between candidate campaign expenditures and the vote. While we recognize campaign spending has an important role in the process by which congruence affects the vote, the inclusion of campaign spending in the analysis should not alter the impact of congruence. When we reestimate the effect of congruence in a model with incumbent spending and challenger spending, the effect of congruence remains significant at the .01 level but modestly reduced in magnitude ($b = -.15$, beta $= -.24$). Even this modestly reduced direct effect of congruence is not unexpected, since candidate spending itself is partly a function of congruence. The level of congruence has a sizeable impact on the spending of both incumbents (beta = .37) and challengers (beta = .31).

APPENDIX

State	District	Congruence Index	State	District	Congruence Index
Alabama	2	.605	Illinois	5	.052
Alabama	5	.681	Illinois	8	.054
Arizona	3	.297	Illinois	12	.065
Arkansas	1	.370	Illinois	14	.066
California	1	.574	Illinois	19	.355
California	3	.214	Illinois	21	.354
California	6	.110	Indiana	3	.397
California	10	.127	Indiana	6	.230
California	18	.433	Indiana	9	.126
California	20	.053	Iowa	3	.295
California	23	.045	Kansas	2	.431
California	29	.046	Kentucky	1	.203
California	35	.052	Kentucky	3	.342
California	39	.051	Louisiana	3	.196
California	42	.320	Louisiana	7	.726
Colorado	1	.228	Maine	1	.554
Colorado	4	.271	Maryland	2	.207
Connecticut	2	.105	Maryland	5	.162
Connecticut	4	.026	Massachusetts	3	.099
Delaware	AL	.131	Massachusetts	7	.092
Florida	5	.159	Massachusetts	11	.095
Florida	8	.235	Michigan	1	.090
Florida	10	.055	Michigan	2	.101
Florida	15	.206	Michigan	7	.379
Georgia	1	.525	Michigan	8	.349
Georgia	4	.157	Michigan	18	.100
Georgia	9	.130	Minnesota	5	.159

APPENDIX (continued)

State	District	Congruence Index	State	District	Congruence Index
Minnesota	8	.464	Oklahoma	1	.467
Mississippi	3	.449	Oklahoma	2	.379
Missouri	6	.398	Oregon	4	.795
Missouri	9	.183	Pennsylvania	2	.070
Nebraska	3	.476	Pennsylvania	9	.199
New Jersey	6	.042	Pennsylvania	11	.380
New Jersey	9	.027	Pennsylvania	13	.073
New Jersey	12	.026	Pennsylvania	20	.147
New Jersey	14	.026	Pennsylvania	24	.699
New York	3	.028	South Carolina	2	.654
New York	11	.027	Tennessee	3	.453
New York	13	.026	Tennessee	8	.292
New York	19	.026	Texas	2	.203
New York	22	.026	Texas	3	.189
New York	25	.026	Texas	10	.777
New York	26	.028	Texas	17	.383
New York	27	.423	Texas	18	.177
New York	30	.964	Texas	21	.377
New York	38	.264	Utah	2	.445
North Carolina	1	.475	Virginia	3	.503
North Carolina	5	.401	Virginia	5	.234
Ohio	3	.348	Washington	1	.196
Ohio	7	.249	Washington	3	.207
Ohio	9	.263	West Virginia	3	.278
Ohio	11	.110	Wisconsin	4	.291
Ohio	17	.078	Wisconsin	6	.286
Ohio	21	.263	Wyoming	AL	.469

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