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THE RETURN OF THE INCUMBENTS: THE NATURE OF THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

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ONE OF THE most elementary facts of political life in America is that incumbent members of the House of Representatives are seldom defeated for reelection. Though this fact is commonly acknowledged, there is little agreement as to the reasons for this phenomenon. No doubt a major reason for the success of incumbents is simple inertia. Incumbents are reelected for many of the same reasons that they were elected to begin with. In the space of two years, the political conditions, the voters, the voters' opinions, and the incumbent himself probably change very little. With all of these stable factors it should not be too surprising if one election produces the same results as the last. However, inertia appears to account only partially for the success of incumbents.

A variety of incumbency advantages also contribute to the success of incumbents. Several studies of congressional elections have estimated the impact of incumbency on the vote. Incumbency was worth about 2 percent of the vote in the 1950s and early 1960s (Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974; Cover 1977) and most estimates indicate that incumbency's value increased to about 5 percent of the vote after the mid-1960s (Mayhew 1974; Erikson 1972; Alford and Hibbing 1981). Moreover, besides adding to a candidate's level of support, incumbency allows candidates to stabilize or maintain their initial support. In effect, incumbency partially supplements "natural" inertia in the process.

The central question addressed in this study is one that has been posed repeatedly in previous studies of incumbency: what is the nature of the incumbency advantage? What is it about being an incumbent that makes winning more probable? Why is incumbency such an asset? What makes the difference?

Previous research has approached this question from two angles. The first has attempted to explain the incumbency advantage in terms of the incumbents' behavior. Mayhew (1974) examined a broad range of advertising, credit-claiming and position-taking activities undertaken by incumbents. Others have examined the specific incumbency advantages that may be derived from campaign financing (Jacobson 1980), the franking privilege (Mayhew 1974), casework (Fiorina 1977 and 1981; Yiannakis

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1981; and Johannes and McAdams 1981), district attentiveness (Parker 1980a; Cranor and Westphal 1978), cosponsorships (Campbell 1982), and committee assignments (Bullock 1972; Fowler, Douglass and Clark 1980).

A second and complementary approach has attempted to explain the incumbency advantage in terms of the voters' opinions. One segment of this approach has concentrated on the recognition and familiarity advantages of incumbents (Stokes and Miller 1966; Abramowitz 1975). A second segment has attempted to assess the substance of the electorate's opinions about incumbents and non-incumbents (Kostroski 1973; Nelson 1978; Ferejohn 1977; Mann 1978). Working within this strain of incumbency research, Parker (1980) has adopted a very straightforward approach for determining the nature of the incumbency advantage, at least as far as the voters are concerned. Parker's approach was to examine voter responses to open-ended questions about what they liked and disliked about the congressional candidates. He grouped these responses into ten categories and then compared what voters said about incumbent candidates with what they said about the challengers. His principal conclusion from this analysis was that voters reward incumbents because of the incumbents' attentiveness to their districts.

The research reported here pursues the approach taken by Parker, though with a few important differences. Rather than asking, as Parker did, what differences voters saw between incumbents and challengers, this research asks how the public's perceptions of congressional candidates change once those candidates become incumbents. The way Parker phrased his question it is impossible to distinguish the inertia component of an incumbent's success from the advantage the candidate gains by becoming incumbent. That is, much of what voters say about an incumbent is what they said about the same candidate before he became an incumbent. The interesting question is not what voters continue to say about the candidate but how voter reactions to a candidate change once the candidate assumes the status of an incumbent.

In asking how voters react differently to congressional candidates once those candidates become incumbents, we will confront a sequence of three sub-questions. These are:

1. To what extent does incumbency benefit a candidate by making him or her more widely recognized and more familiar to voters than a challenger?

2. Is the incumbency advantage a positive response to incumbents or, as some have suggested (Mann and Wolfinger 1980: 626; Collie 1981: 130; and Jacobson and Kernell 1981: 17), a negative response to weak challengers?

3. Finally, what are the voters more (or less) likely to say substantively about a candidate and the challenger after the candidate becomes an incumbent? And, what might this change indicate about the importance of various incumbent activities for reelection?

THE DATA

The data analyzed here are from the 1978 and 1980 CPS National Election Studies. These studies surveyed a sample of voting-age citizens (1978, $n=2,304$; and 1980, $n=1,614$) in the same 108 congressional districts. Of these 108 districts, 14 elected a new representative in 1978.¹ All 14 of these representatives or new incumbents ran successfully for their first reelection in 1980. In these 14 districts 293 respondents were interviewed in 1978 and 179 were interviewed in 1980. The nature of the incumbency advantage will be ascertained by examining changes in the reactions of these voters to the new incumbent and the challengers. The voters in the remaining districts are used as a quasi-control group to monitor period effects or general fluctuations in voter attitudes between elections. The voters' reaction to candidates in both new incumbent (i.e., a challenger who won in 1978 and ran in 1980) and old incumbent (i.e., incumbent won in 1978 and ran in 1980) districts are measured by response to open-ended questions about what voters like and dislike about each candidate. These responses were then grouped into ten categories (similar to those developed by Parker) for comparison across elections.²

FINDINGS

The first set of findings concern the recognition or familiarity advantage of incumbents. Because incumbents have opportunities to advertise themselves to their constituencies while performing their official duties, they are supposed to hold a significant recognition advantage over challengers. The typical challenger, on the other hand, lacks the resources of office (e.g., media exposure, speaking engagements, district newsletters, etc.) and must fight to win the attention of a preoccupied public. This recognition/familiarity component of the incumbency advantage was estimated by examining the changes from 1978 to 1980 in voter responses, either positive or negative, about both incumbents and challengers. This data is presented in Table 1.

¹The fourteen districts in the sample that elected a first-term representative in 1978 consisted of five districts that elected Republicans and nine districts that elected Democrats. The state, district, representative, and party affiliation follow: Kansas (2) Jeffries (R); Massachusetts (11) Donnelly (D); New Jersey (14) Guarini (D); Pennsylvania (2) Gray (D); Texas (18) Leland (D); Texas (17) Stenholm (D); Oklahoma (2) Synar (D); Ohio (3) Hall (D); Minnesota (5) Sabo (D); California (3) Matsui (D); Texas (21) Loeffler (R); Wyoming (all) Cheney (R); California (39) Dannemeyer (R); and California (18) Thomas (R). Same note should be made of the nature of the races won by the new incumbents in 1978. Only one, Jeffries, defeated an incumbent in the general election. The other thirteen new incumbents won open seats, three winning seats previously held by the opposition party. Two new incumbents, Gray and Synar, defeated their own party's incumbents in primary elections.

²The CPS open-ended codes were collapsed into ten categories in the following manner: Experience and Ability (201-300, 601-698); Leadership Qualities (301-320, 397); District Attention (321-396); Personal Qualities (400-499); Party (500-510, 515, 516, 597); Ideology and Philosophy (531-536, 801-899); Domestic Policy (511, 512, 517, 518, 900-1026); Foreign Policy (513, 514, 519, 520, 1101-1199); Group Identification (1200-1299); Miscellaneous (541-597, 700-799).

TABLE 1. FAMILIARITY OF VOTERS WITH OLD INCUMBENTS AND THEIR CHALLENGERS AND NEW INCUMBENTS AND THEIR CHALLENGERS, 1978 AND 1980

Familiarity	Old			New		
	Incumbent	Challenger	Difference	Incumbent	Challenger	Difference
1978	58%	24%	+34%	51%	39%	+12%
	(1698)	(857)		(235)	(201)	
1980	52%	25%	+27%	43%	17%	+26%
	(1111)	(707)		(160)	(93)	

On first inspection Table 1 seems to suggest that incumbents gain a considerable advantage over challengers by way of their greater familiarity to the public. When they ran as challengers in 1978, the new incumbents were known by 12 percent more of the electorate than their opponents. By their first reelection in 1980 this margin had grown to a 26 percent advantage. However, two points should be noted. First, before ever becoming incumbents, the “new incumbents” were already more familiar to voters than their challengers. Indeed, by the familiarity criterion used here, the new incumbents entered Congress nearly as well known in their districts as the old incumbents were known in theirs. Secondly, though the familiarity gap (percent familiar with incumbent-percent familiar with challenger) increased once the candidate became an incumbent, the expected increase was not produced in the expected way. Rather than new incumbents gaining greater familiarity after serving their two-year term, the challengers opposing the new incumbents were less familiar to voters than the original challengers. The decline in the familiarity of challengers and the resulting increase in the familiarity gap may in part be due to the fact that stronger, more widely known challengers may have been attracted to the open seat contests of 1978 than to contests against sitting new incumbents in 1980.³ Both of these facts, along with the evidence assembled by others (Abramowitz 1975 and Mann and Wolfinger 1980), should temper any grand claims about the incumbency advantage being a familiarity advantage. To be sure, an association between familiarity and incumbency exists, but it seems that familiarity is more of a prerequisite for becoming an incumbent than an advantage flowing from incumbency itself.

The second set of findings concerns the direction of the incumbency advantage. Are voters positive about the incumbents or negative about their challengers? The percentages of likes and dislikes for incumbents, both new and old, and their challengers are presented in Table 2.

Quite clearly the greatest change in the new incumbents’ districts was the increase in favorable comments about the new incumbent. In 1978, 45

³ Although the challengers to the new incumbents in 1980 were probably weaker than their counterparts of 1978, it is also likely that they were stronger candidates generally than challengers to the old incumbents. While the design and data limitations of this study do not permit a thorough analysis of this point, it seems most likely that, all things being equal, the strength of challengers would be greatest in open seats, less in seats with new incumbents, and least in seats with old incumbents.

TABLE 2. LIKES AND DISLIKES ABOUT NEW INCUMBENTS
AND OLD INCUMBENTS AND THEIR CHALLENGERS IN 1978 AND 1980

	1978		1980		<i>Change for Old Incumbent</i>	<i>Change for Challenger</i>
	<i>Old Incumbent</i>	<i>Challenger</i>	<i>Old Incumbent</i>	<i>Challenger</i>		
Likes	81%	7%	63%	17%	-18%	+10%
Dislikes	4%	8%	13%	7%	+9%	-1%
	(N = 2144)		(N = 1540)			
	1978		1980		<i>Change for New Incumbent</i>	<i>Change for Challenger</i>
	<i>Old Incumbent</i>	<i>Challenger</i>	<i>New Incumbent</i>	<i>Challenger</i>		
Likes	45%	16%	74%	9%	+29%	-7%
Dislikes	22%	17%	10%	7%	-12%	-10%
	(N = 383)		(N = 160)			

NOTE: Percentages are all of responses about candidates in a particular type of contest (i.e., old incumbents and their challengers or new incumbents and their challengers) for each year. Also, note that the N's are the numbers of responses and not respondents.

percent of all comments about either the new incumbents or their challengers were favorable comments about the new incumbent. Even though pro-incumbent responses were quite frequent at this 1978 baseline, they were substantially more frequent in the 1980 reelection bids. Three out of four comments about either candidate in 1980 were positive comments about the new incumbent, a 29 percent increase over 1978. This increase is particularly impressive in light of the general decline in the proportion of positive remarks about the old incumbents from the 1978 to the 1980 election.

Given that the principal change in voter reactions in new incumbent contests is in the extent of positive assessments of the new incumbents, we now ask whether the character of these positive remarks changes or whether just the frequency of the various positive comments increase across the board? It is in the character of these positive assessments that the nature of the incumbency advantage may be revealed, at least as it is seen from the voters' perspective. Table 3 presents distributions of positive statements about new and old incumbents for 1978 and 1980, the change for both over this period, and the difference in changes (i.e., whether particular evaluations of new incumbents changed more or less than evaluations of old incumbents). The same breakdown of positive responses has been calculated for only those respondents who reported that they voted for the new or old incumbent. These figures, presented in Appendix A, differ only slightly from those that included all respondents.

An inspection of responses in Table 3 indicated two major movements in positive statements about new incumbents. In the 1980 race for reelection the public was much more inclined to focus on the experience and abilities of the new incumbent and far less inclined (at least in terms of the

TABLE 3. POSITIVE EVALUATIONS OF NEW AND OLD INCUMBENTS IN 1978 AND 1980 ELECTIONS (ALL RESPONDENTS)

Evaluation	New Incumbents			Old Incumbents (Control Group)			Difference in Changes (3-6) (7)
	1978 (1)	1980 (2)	Change (2-1) (3)	1978 (4)	1980 (5)	Change (5-4) (6)	
Experience/Ability	12%	24%	+12%	25%	20%	-5%	+17%
Leadership/Qualities	3	3	0	3	3	0	-1
District Attention	6	13	+6	24	30	+6	0
Personal Qualities	46	25	-21	26	24	-2	-19
Party	5	10	+5	3	4	+1	+4
Ideology/Philosophy	6	8	+2	5	5	0	+2
Domestic Policy	6	7	0	5	6	+1	0
Foreign Policy	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Group Identification	12	9	-2	5	6	+1	-3
Miscellaneous	4	2	-2	5	3	-2	0
Total	100% (172)	101% (118)		102% (1521)	102% (966)		

NOTE: The change and difference scores may occasionally differ from computations based on the other columns because of rounding.

proportion of positive assessments) to focus on the new incumbents' personal qualities. By comparison, shifts in the proportion of voters mentioning other positive characteristics were minor or negligible.

In the 1978 campaign the new incumbents' personal qualities stood out in the voters' thinking. Forty-six percent of all positive comments made about new incumbents involved these personal qualities. These included comments about the candidates' honesty, intelligence, likeableness and so forth. However, in their reelection bids, only a quarter of all positive responses were of this sort. This decline put the new incumbents about on a par with the old incumbents for the proportion of positive responses that involved personal qualities.

In contrast, the new incumbents' experience and abilities accounted for only about 12 percent of the positive responses in 1978. Although this was the second most frequently mentioned category of evaluation, it was a distant second to mentions of personal qualities. By 1980 approximately 24 percent of all positive comments about the new incumbents were about their experience and abilities. Moreover, this 12 percent increase took place while voters were slightly less inclined than they had been to mention the experience and abilities of the old incumbents (a 5 percent decline from 1978 to 1980).

The absence of significant changes in certain other evaluations, particularly district attention, also deserves note. The data in Table 3 suggest that incumbency does little to promote a candidate's leadership qualities, party affiliations, ideology, and policy positions or group identifications. Especially interesting in this regard is the failure of district attention to emerge as a significant advantage for the new incumbents. In Parker's

cross-sectional analysis, district attention was given star billing as the basis of the incumbency advantage.⁴ However, the changes in voter responses to the new incumbents do not substantiate this conclusion. Positive mentions of district attention increased from 6.4 percent to 12.7 percent for new incumbents; however, there was an equivalent increase in these comments about the control group of old incumbents. Moreover, even with the 6 percent increase in mentions of district attention for the new incumbents, voters were far less likely to mention this evaluation about new incumbents than they were about old incumbents in 1980 (12.7 to 30.1 percent). On the basis of these figures it seems that district attention is not a major component of the incumbency advantage, at least not an explicitly mentioned component of that advantage. However, given the gap between new and old incumbents in 1980, one might speculate that district attention is something acknowledged by voters over an incumbent's career rather than immediately upon becoming an incumbent.

To this point we have been working under the assumption that all new incumbents receive equal benefits from the incumbency advantage, but this may not be the case. By dropping the assumption the data can be analyzed in a second way to identify relevant changes in voter reactions to the new incumbents. If the incumbency advantage is considered as the bestowal of opportunities on candidates who may more or less effectively exploit them, then the importance of the various opportunities may be revealed by comparing more successful with less successful incumbents. Following this line of reasoning, the new incumbent districts were divided into two groups: seven districts in which the new incumbents made greater improvements in their electoral margins from 1978 to 1980 and six districts in which the new incumbents made smaller or no improvements in their electoral margins.⁵ Changes in the various positive comments

⁴ Parker may have attributed undue importance to district attention not only because he was unable to examine voter opinions over time but because of the importance he attached to the infrequent mentions of district attention as something disliked about incumbents. District attention is seldom mentioned as a negative comment about incumbents, as Parker rightly noted. However, as we have already seen in Table 2, negative comments of any sort about incumbents are infrequent when compared to all comments made about the candidates.

⁵ The 1978 percentage of the vote for the new incumbent was subtracted from the 1980 percentage. This gain was then adjusted to reflect national partisan vote swings — the national Democratic vote for House of Representatives was 54 percent in 1978 and 50 percent in 1980 and the national Republican vote was 45 percent in 1978 and 48 percent in 1980. The median adjusted voter gain, about 8 percent, was used to define the more and less successful categories. Those in the more successful category and their adjusted vote gain include: Stenholm (+36%), Gray (+18%), Matsui (+22%), Loeffler (+16%), Sabo (+12%), Dannemeyer (+9%), and Thomas (+9%). Those in the less successful category include: Leland (-13%), Synar (-3%), Jeffries (-1%), Guarini (+4%), Hall (+7%) and Cheney (+7%). The Donnelly district was excluded from this portion of the analysis since he faced no major party opposition in either year but would have been placed in the less successful category because he made nearly no electoral gain. Although the sample size is not very large in Table 4, the relations are fairly stable. If one excludes the four districts falling close to the median gain, the patterns found with respect to experience/ability and district attention actually are even more pronounced.

about both more successful and less successful new incumbents were then computed and compared. The evaluations most important to the incumbency advantage should be those that particularly increase for the most successful of the new incumbents. The data is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. POSITIVE EVALUATIONS OF MORE AND LESS SUCCESSFUL INCUMBENTS (ALL VOTERS)

Evaluation	More Successful New Incumbents			Less Successful New Incumbents			Difference in Changes (3-6) (7)
	1978 (1)	1980 (2)	Change (2-1) (3)	1978 (4)	1980 (5)	Change (5-4) (6)	
Experience/Ability	7%	25%	+18%	16%	22%	+6%	+12%
Leadership/Qualities	1	3	+2	4	2	-1	+3
District Attention	7	9	+1	6	20	14	-12
Personal Qualities	52	23	-29	40	30	-9	-20
Party	6	10	+4	5	11	+6	-2
Ideology/Philosophy	6	13	+7	6	0	-6	+13
Domestic Policy	6	4	-2	7	9	+2	-3
Foreign Policy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Group Identification	12	11	-1	12	7	-6	+5
Miscellaneous	2	3	0	5	0	-5	+5
Total	99% (83)	101% (71)		101% (83)	101% (46)		

NOTE: The change and difference scores may occasionally differ from computations based on the other columns because of rounding.

The data in Table 4 support the earlier findings on several counts. First, while mentions of experience and abilities increase in the reelection campaigns of both groups of new incumbents, the increase is particularly large for the more successful new incumbents. Secondly, as one might expect from the earlier findings, the decline in comments about the personal qualities of new incumbents was greatest for the more successful new incumbents.

The evidence in Table 4 also confirms the earlier findings about district attentiveness. If district attentiveness were the basis for the incumbency advantage, we should expect that positive remarks about district attentiveness should increase more for the more successful new incumbents than for their less successful colleagues. This did not prove to be the case. In fact, mentions of district attention increased by 14 percentage points for the less successful new incumbents. This is hardly what one would expect if district attention were the basis for the incumbency advantage. These data, like the data presented earlier in Table 3, lend strong support to the conclusion that district attention is not an explicit or significant component of the incumbency advantage.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the changes in the voters' perceptions of candidates as the candidates move from the ranks of challengers to

incumbents. These changes indicate why candidates are rewarded for being incumbents or for exploiting the opportunities available to incumbents. Although new incumbents enjoyed an increased familiarity advantage over their opponents in their first reelection, the data suggest that the incumbency advantage also involves changes in voter evaluations of the candidates, especially more positive evaluations of the new incumbents. In particular, voters were more likely to note the experience and abilities of new incumbents after they had served a term in office. To the voter, incumbency means experience and ability more than anything else.

Why voters interpret incumbency in this way or choose to focus on this particular aspect of incumbency is another question. Perhaps voters transfer positive feelings about the government or country to these officials. The step from candidate to incumbent may be a step from politician to statesman. Or, the experience and ability of incumbency may be emphasized because voters believe, rightly or wrongly, that new incumbents have learned on the job. Perhaps the new incumbents undertake particular activities that build and spread this image of experience and ability among their constituents. Or, still again, the attention paid to the experience and abilities of the incumbents may simply mean that voters value stability for its own sake. Certainly all of these and other possible reasons for the focus on the experience and abilities of new incumbents deserve considerable further inquiry.

APPENDIX A. POSITIVE EVALUATIONS OF NEW AND OLD INCUMBENTS IN 1978 AND 1980 ELECTIONS (ONLY VOTERS FOR INCUMBENTS)

Evaluation	New Incumbents			Old Incumbents (Control Group)			Difference in Changes (3-6) (7)
	1978 (1)	1980 (2)	Change (2-1) (3)	1978 (4)	1980 (5)	Change (5-4) (6)	
Experience/Ability	14%	26%	+12%	24%	19%	-5%	+16%
Leadership/Qualities	3	3	0	2	3	+1	0
District Attention	6	13	+8	25	30	+5	2
Personal Qualities	46	22	-25	26	24	-3	-22
Party	4	8	+4	3	4	+1	+3
Ideology/Philosophy	5	8	+4	5	5	+1	+3
Domestic Policy	6	7	+2	5	6	+1	0
Foreign Policy	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Group Identification	11	10	-1	5	6	+1	+2
Miscellaneous	6	2	-4	5	3	-2	-2
Total	101% (106)	99% (97)		101% (919)	101% (694)		

NOTE: The change and difference scores may occasionally differ from computations based on the other columns because of rounding.

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