Electoral Competition &
the Congressional Connection:
The Marginality Hypothesis Reconsidered

James E. Campbell

The effect of electoral competition on a representative's responsiveness to his constituents' public policy opinions has been the subject of a continuing controversy in the study of legislative behavior. Any conventional wisdom existing in this debate is contained in the marginality hypothesis. The marginality hypothesis supposes that legislators who come from highly competitive districts are more likely to be sensitive to district demands than legislators who hold safe seats. Given that a representative's principal goal is re-election, marginal representatives should be more solicitous of their constituents in an effort to diminish electoral uncertainty. Conversely, the legislator from the safe district faces less pressure and can assume greater independence.

Many researchers have investigated this hypothesis. In general, the findings have been inconclusive. Some have found evidence to support the marginality hypothesis (MacRae, 1952; Shannon, 1968; Patterson, 1961; Dye, 1961; Sullivan and Uslaner, 1978) but others have either found no appreciable relationship between electoral competition and responsiveness (Erikson and Wright, 1968) or an inverse relationship (Miller, 1964; Huntington, 1950; Fiorina, 1973; Jones, 1973; Froman, 1963).

This paper offers possible explanations of these discrepancies. In the first section, a modified version of Fiorina's (1974) "simple theory of constituency influence"

will be constructed. In the second, the theory will be ana-
lyzed to reveal several conditions that might hide the actual
relationship between electoral competition and legislative
responsiveness. Finally, by making several assumptions about
legislators' goals, it is suggested that the relationship
between district competitiveness and sensitivity to constit-
uency influence may be curvilinear. Both the failure to set
electoral considerations in the context of other influences
on legislative behavior and the incorrect specification of
marginality may account for the discrepancies found in past
research.

A MODEL OF CONSTITUENCY INFLUENCE

Fiorina (1974, 1975) has proposed a formal theoretical
model of constituency influence based on a representative's
subjective judgment about the probability of his re-election,
his "aspired" probability of re-election, the probability
that certain constituency groups care about a particular
issue, and the perceived rewards and penalties these groups
can impose on the representative. Under the assumption that
a representative's primary goal is re-election, two strat-
egies are formulated--the maximizing strategy and the main-
taining strategy. A maximizer simply attempts to maximize
the probability of re-election by supporting the strongest
group in the district on each issue. The maintainer, on the
other hand, has attained his "aspired" or "minimally accept-
able" probability of re-election and wishes only to preserve
this position. To maintain or stabilize his re-election
chances the legislator must carefully balance loyalties to
the different constituent groups so that the costs of sup-
porting the weaker groups are offset by the benefits derived
from aligning with the stronger groups.[1] This balance is
achieved by following Fiorina's decision calculus, presented
in Equation #1.

$$\text{If } p=p^*, \text{ then } \quad Q_k = \frac{c_1 z_1 - c_2 x_2}{c_1 z_z - c_2 x_2 + c_1 x_1 - c_2 x_2} \qquad (1)$$

where,

p   is the representative's subjective estimate of his
     current probability of re-election.

p^* is the representative's minimum "acceptable" sub-
     jective probability of re-election.

c_j is the representative's estimate of whether group
     "j" cares about issue "k".

x_j is the expected increment of "p" resulting from voting as members of group "j" desire.

z_j is the expected decrement of "p" resulting from not voting as members of group "j" desire.

Q_k is the minimum proportion of the times the representative must act in accord with the strongest group (in this case group 1) on issue "k" to maintain his current level of "p".

Although this calculation identifies the minimum responsiveness level for a legislator who wishes to maintain his or her current re-election prospects (that is, $p=p^*$), it neglects to offer a strategy to representatives who do not wish to maintain their present re-election chances. One can easily imagine instances in which a legislator desires to increase the probability of re-election or would find a lesser probability acceptable. Consequently, the model must be adjusted to prescribe an appropriate strategy when $p \neq p^*$. A revised version of the model appears as expression #2. Two revisions have been made.[2] First, the model has been modified to permit an examination of general rather than issue-specific responsiveness, allowing an appraisal of the long-term consequences of the legislator's decisions on the relationship between p and p^*. Second, the revised model explicitly takes into account possible differences between p and p^* and assigns an appropriate strategy for the particular circumstances. The model allows p and p^* to vary between 0 and 1, which covers all conceivable re-election situations, with the maximizer ($p^*=1$) and the maintainer ($p=p^*$) appearing as special cases of the overall model.[3]

$$Q = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^{n} (c_{1k} z_{1k} - c_{2k} x_{2k})}{\sum_{k=1}^{n} (c_{1k} z_{1k} - c_{2k} x_{2k} + c_{1k} x_{1k} - c_{2k} z_{2k}) - v} \qquad (2)$$

where,

n   is the number of issues.

v   is the electoral consideration variable equal to p^*-p. This may also be referred to as the desired change in p.

Q   is the representative's minimum probability of responding to the strongest group (group 1) so that the level of p is changed to that of p^*.

The logic of this calculation may best be demonstrated by comparing several hypothetical situations. First, we simplify matters by assuming that the issues are of equal salience to both groups ($c_{1k} = c_{2k}$) and that the various individual values for z's and x's have been summed.[4] Now let us assume a district in which $z_1 = .4$, $x_1 = .3$, $z_2 = .2$, and $x_2 = .1$. It follows that if such a representative were to follow group 1 consistently his/her re-election chances would increase by .1 and if the representative were to follow group 2 consistently his/her chances would decline by .3 (that is, $x_2-z_1 = .1 -.4 = -.3$). Let us further assume three representatives (A, B, and C) each having $p* = .7$ but having values of p equal to .7, .75, and .65 respectively. Congressman A is in the position of a maintainer. He can break even if for every time he votes with group 2, he votes three times with group 1. His minimum responsiveness to group 1 (i.e., the Q value) is .75. It is evident that if he votes with group 1 75 percent of the time he ought to gain .075 in terms of p (the gain in p is calculated as $Q \times [x_1 - z_2]$);

whereas the 25 percent of time he votes with group 2 will cost him the .075 in terms of p, since the effect of voting with group 2 is $(1-Q) \times (x_2-z_1)$. The net effect is that the current level of p is maintained by voting with group 1 precisely 75 percent of the time.

Congressman B faces a different situation. His probability of re-election exceeds his minimum acceptable chance of re-election. This being the case, he can afford to defect from group 1 more often than Congressman A. His appropriate strategy is to vote with group 1 67 percent of the time. For every time he supports group 2, he must vote with group 1 twice, so that his probability of re-election will not erode below the acceptable level. This strategy permits an erosion in p of exactly .05 (this is calculated from, $Q \times (x_1-z_2) + (1-Q) \times (x_2-z_1)$. The decline of the re-election probability from .75 to .7 is precisely what Congressman B feels he can afford.

Congressman C faces a very different situation. His current probability of re-election is less than his minimum standard. To compensate for a probability of re-election below $p*$ the legislator must vote with the strongest group 86 percent of the time. That is, C can only afford to vote with group 2 once every six times he votes with group 1. This strategy will increase his chances by exactly .05 from .65 to .7--the minimum level the representative finds acceptable.

PROBLEMS OF IDENTIFYING MARGINALITY IMPACT

The marginality debate concerns the impact of marginality when all other things are equal. Many problems encountered in identifying the true impact of marginality are a result of not isolating marginality effects from an assortment of extraneous influences and complicating conditions. The revised model of constituency influence reveals five of these problems which must be taken into account before the impact of marginality can be adequately estimated.

The first problem concerns the limitations of the re-election strategy. Although the model prescribes a responsiveness strategy suitable to any re-election situation, it only establishes a lower limit of responsiveness. Thus, two representatives may be placed in identical electoral circumstances but exhibit quite different levels of responsiveness. For one representative, the demands of goals other than re-election may require defection from the strongest constituency groups as often as possible without allowing re-election chances to fall below the desired level. However, the other representative may find greater harmony between re-election interests and other goals. Consequently, his responsiveness rate will exceed the minimum estimated by the model. In this situation, instances of spurious congruence may be confused with instances of re-election-inspired responsiveness.[5] If this mistake is made, estimates of marginality influences on responsiveness may be either attenuated or biased.

A second confounding influence is that all elements of the strategy calculations are subjective assessments by the representatives. To the extent that these subjective appraisals are in error, the responsiveness strategy may be distorted. For the most part, these errors may be random among the representatives; however, they may be non-random if certain characteristics associated with electoral competitiveness are also associated with the perceptual accuracy of representatives. One such characteristic may be seniority. The unmeasured effects of seniority (Figure 1) may either suppress a negative direct relationship or inflate a positive direct relationship between safe districts and responsive representation. This problem can be avoided if influences such as seniority are explicitly taken into account (see Sullivan and Uslaner, 1978).

Failure to estimate accurately the salience of different issues to constituent groups also creates problems for measuring marginality influence.[6] The rate at which group members decide to support or oppose a representative's re-election depends on the importance they attach to the issue as well as on the proximity of their issue position to that

FIGURE 1

THE POSSIBLE COMPLICATING EFFECT OF SENIORITY
ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARGINALITY
AND RESPONSIVENESS

Seniority

+   +

Safe Seat ————————————————▶ Responsiveness
                    (+ or -)
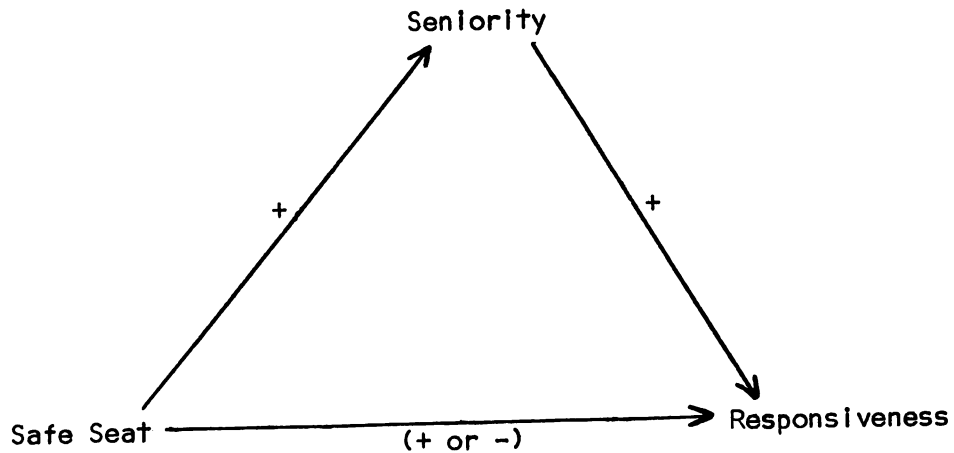
of the representative. Thus, in forming a re-election strat-
egy it is only reasonable for the representative to consider
most strongly the concerned issue public within the district
and their division of opinion. To the extent that analysts
fail to measure accurately these considerations in recon-
structing legislators' thinking, the influence of salience
in determining a responsiveness strategy may be misconstrued
as the influence of marginality.

Fourth, the estimations of the groups' probability in-
crements (i.e., the s's and the z's) need not only depend on
the number of voters in the groups. They may also reflect
whether a group is considered part of the representative's
own coalition, neutral, or part of the opposition's following
(Fenno, 1977); whether the group is cohesive or factrional-
ized; and whether the group's support is considered fluid or
stable. It is quite reasonable for a representative to pay
greater attention to the support of groups that are favorably
disposed towards him rather than to groups that are hostile.
By defining his most likely winning coalition, the represent-
ative defines in part who may most hurt or most help his re-
election chances. A group's cohesiveness also merits atten-
tion. Bloc voting for or against a candidate prevents the
group from neutralizing its own influence. Finally, a
group's potential for switching support may enhance its in-
fluence; if it is locked into support or opposition, the

representative has no reason to believe the group may alter his re-election chances.[7] If representatives view their constituencies in these terms while investigators presume that all citizens are counted equally in the representative's thinking, significant errors may be introduced into the analysis of marginality's impact on the representative's responsiveness.

The final problem the revised model of constituency influence reveals is the danger of looking for marginality effects within issue areas rather than across the full range of issues and legislative behaviors (e.g., home style, pork barrel, etc.).[8] A represenative need not strike a balance on each issue if his overall record will draw the support he desires. Although representatives and their constituents may consider policy matters in different categories, constituents must eventually make the single decision to support or oppose re-election. It is this single decision that should concern the re-election minded representative and it is this decision, not necessarily each separate element of it, that the representative must design his responsiveness strategy to affect. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that marginality influences can be observed by inspecting responsiveness patterns in distinct policy areas.

TOWARD A THEORY OF MARGINALITY INFLUENCE

An inspection of the model of constituency influence not only may identify possible pitfalls for the study of marginality but also may indicate the nature of the relationship between marginality and responsiveness. An important aspect of this relationship revealed in the model is that the probability of a representative's re-election does not have a direct influence on the responsiveness strategy. A re-election strategy becomes apparent only when current re-election chances are viewed in relation to a representative's minimally acceptable chances. It is the difference between re-election hopes and current re-election chances that defines a representative's electoral circumstances and directly shapes his responsiveness strategy. This is not to say that there is no pattern of responsiveness associated with varying levels of electoral competition. However, it does mean that the existence of a pattern depends on there being a relationship between the current probability or re-election (p) and the desired probability of re-election (p*) and that the nature of marginality influence depends on the nature of the relationship between current and desired re-election chances.

Of course without the appropriate data it is impossible

to determine whether there is or is not a particular rela-
tionship between p and p*. However, given several assump-
tions about the motivations of a representative and the
nature of his district, a relationship between p and p* and
thus a pattern of marginality influence may be inferred.
The first assumption posits the primacy of the re-election
goal. That is, it is assumed that representatives strongly
desire re-election and, thus, are very sensitive to the
possibilities of gaining support. Second, it is assumed that
representatives are risk averse. They are not satisfied with
their re-election prospects until those prospects are quite
high. Third, representatives have goals other than re-
election that they wish to pursue (see, Fenno, 1973; and
Cavanagh, 1978) and these goals may at times conflict with
the dictates of re-election. Fourth, the salience of re-
election causes a representative to be fairly well attuned
to the limits of his potential support. To recognize that
the re-election goal must not be set unrealistically high is
merely prudent in forming a feasible re-election strategy.
In other words, p* must be as achievable as it is accept-
able.[9] The final assumption is that marginal districts are
likely to be somewhat more heterogeneous than safe districts
(Froman, 1963; Fiorina, 1974).[10]

This final assumption is quite important since it can
be shown that a district's heterogeneity exerts pressure on
a representative's re-election aspirations. Consider a
hypothetical heterogeneous district in which z_1 = .51, X_1 =
.51, z_2 = .49 and X_2 = .49 and a hypothetical homogeneous
district in which z_1 = .99, X_1 = .99, z_2 = .01 and x_2 = .01.
If the representatives from these districts wish to maintain
their current re-election chances (v=0), they are advised to
follow the same responsiveness strategy (Q=.5). Although
the representatives share a common maintaining strategy,
they encounter much different opportunities to increase
their re-election chances. The representative from the homo-
geneous district could conceivably add .98 to his re-election
chances by complete responsiveness to the strongest constit-
uency group, whereas complete responsiveness on the part of
the representative from the heterogeneous district adds only
.02 to his chances. This difference of opportunities is an
obvious inducement to representatives from homogeneous dis-
tricts to set higher re-election goals and to representatives
from evenly divided districts to keep their re-election goals
at modest levels.

By combining the assumed motivations of the representa-
tive with the electoral opportunities offered by the dis-
trict, the relationship between current and desired re-

election chances may be reconstructed. If considered alone, the assumption of the re-election goal's primacy would set p* at 1 for all representatives. The existance of non-electoral goals causes a decrease in p*, but risk aversion maintains the re-election goal at a reasonably high plateau. From this plateau, reasonable re-election expectations (and consequently re-election goals) are further diminished by the limited electoral opportunities offered by the district's heterogeneity and the representative's sensitivity to this constraint. This is particularly true in marginal districts since they tend to be more heterogeneous.[11] These considerations suggest the curve presented in Figure 1.[12] The deviations of the curve from the diagonal are the desired changes in re-election chances. Given this pattern of desired changes in re-election chances (v) and the positive relationship between these desired changes and the responsiveness strategy (Q), the influence of marginality on responsiveness can be deduced. The marginality-responsiveness relationship is presented in Figure 3. This curve may be examined in four segments corresponding to four distinct re-election situations.
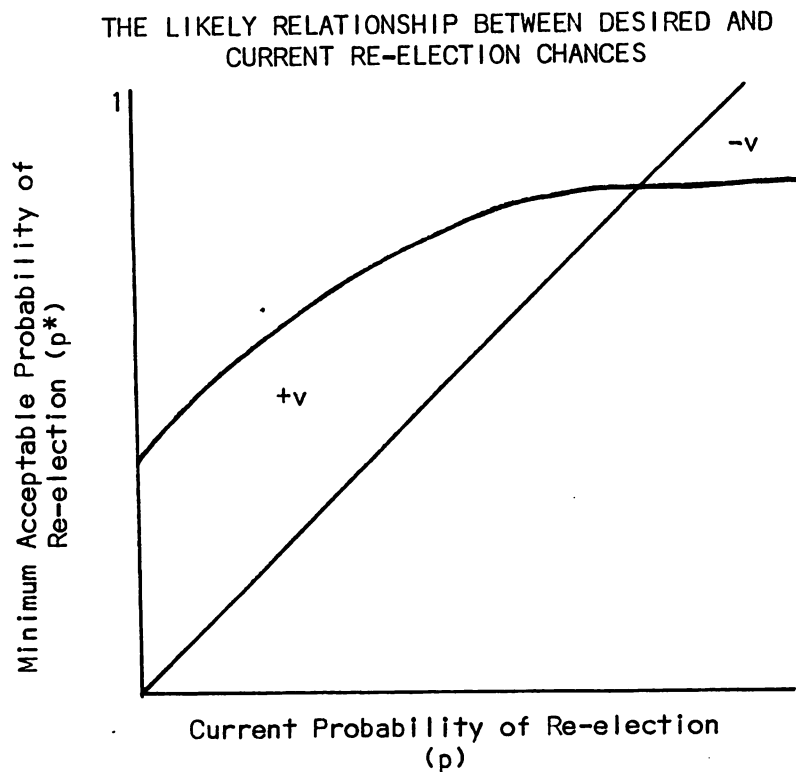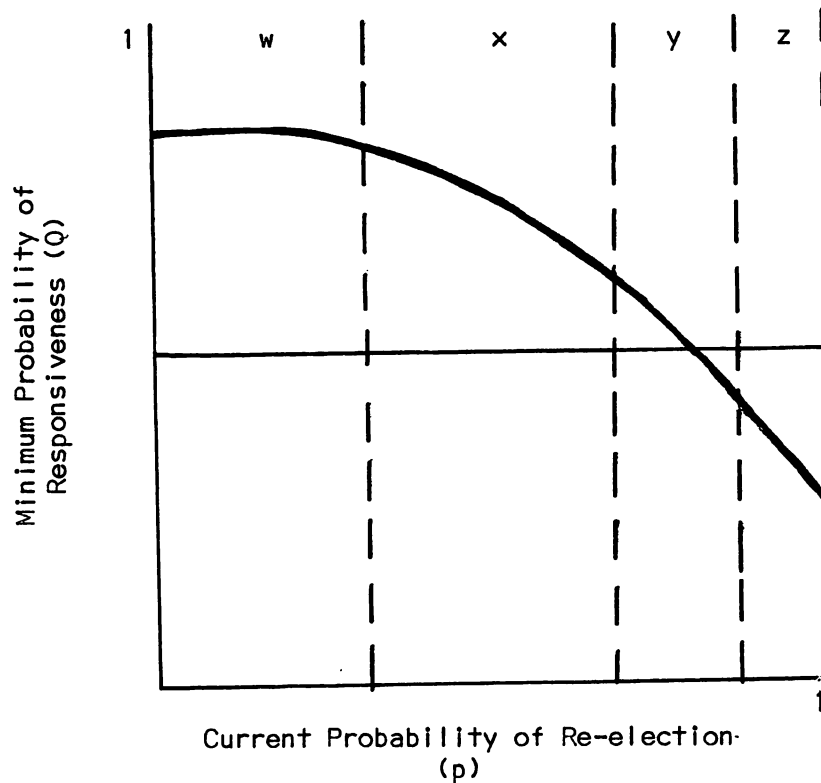
FIGURE 2

THE LIKELY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIRED AND
CURRENT RE-ELECTION CHANCES

Current Probability of Re-election
(p)

FIGURE 3

THE LIKELY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESPONSIVENESS
AND CURRENT RE-ELECTION CHANCES

Current Probability of Re-election·
(p)

    The first segment of the curve, segment w, corresponds
to the situation of a representative in a very marginal seat.
This representative's insecurity generates a great concern
for constituency opinion. However, this concern is tempered
by the realization of heterogeneity constraints. Diligent
service to constituents may produce only a slight re-election
advantage. Much of this representative's efforts to gain
support are neutralized by the divisive character of the
district. As a result of this inelasticity of support, the
desire to gain support is dampened. In short, the reponsive-
ness incentives of electoral vulnerability are partially off-
set by the discouraging prospects of improving re-election
chances.

    The second re-election situation, corresponding to seg-
ment x of Figure 3, concerns a less marginal district. This
representative is slightly more secure than his very marginal

colleague, but thinks that it is both desirable and possible to achieve a position of greater certainty. The environmental constraints in this district are less severe than those in the very marginal district. This representative is quite eager to take full advantage of these electoral opportunities and may set a very demanding re-election goal, calculating that a slight advantage enjoyed over the opposition, if properly nurtured, could eliminate the difference between present and desired chances of re-election. Thus, the representative concludes that a significant investment in responsiveness, almost as great as the investment of the very marginal representative, is justified by its probable electoral payoff.

The third situation, segment y on the curve, is the maintaining position. This representative has reached an equilibrium between current and desired re-election chances.[13] The likelihood of re-election is satisfactory and the strategy simply seeks to solidify the status quo. Although quite safe, the representative is not so safe that serious opposition has disappeared. Consequently, he may indulge somewhat in the pursuit of goals other than re-election, but he cannot often afford to neglect constituency requests.

The final situation, segment z of Figure 3, is the extremely safe district. This representative assesses present chances of re-election to be greater than the minimum acceptable chances, as a result of the diminishing returns of re-election chances. That is, since re-election prospects are already quite good, the incentives to maintain or build a stronger coalition are weakened and the difficulties of capturing additional support are increased. The incumbent can afford to pursue goals other than re-election and still remain highly secure. Given these circumstances, the representative determines that the responsiveness required to maintain the present level of electoral security is simply not worth the attention and resources responsiveness draws from non-electoral matters.

If the assumptions and inferences of the preceding analysis are correct, it appears that the conventional marginality hypothesis incorrectly specifies the influence of electoral competition on responsiveness in two ways. First, even after non-electoral influences have been taken into account, electoral considerations are a less positive influence on responsiveness than supposed. Because electoral goals are a component of the considerations and because these goals may demand less than absolute certainty of re-election, electoral considerations are less positive than has been supposed and may actually diminish responsiveness in the safest districts. Second, even after the generally

diminished influence of electoral considerations is taken into account, the electoral considerations of the very marginal are less than supposed. Because district heterogeneity is one cause of marginality, the electoral motivations for responsiveness are particularly weakened among the very marginal.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This analysis has reconsidered the influence of marginality in light of an explicit model of constituency influence. From this analysis two tentative conclusions about the effects of electoral competition on responsiveness to constituency opinions may be drawn.

First, the importance of electoral competition for constituency influence must be viewed relative to the effects of various other considerations on constituency influence. The simple fact that these influences may distort the assessment of marginality influences suggests that the importance of electoral competition for constituency influence has been, implicitly if not explicitly, exaggerated. This is not to say that electoral competition is a trivial influence on responsiveness. However, a proper perspective on marginality influence is gained only by examining it within the context of all influences on legislative behavior.

Second, the relationship between electoral competition and responsiveness is quite complex. The influence of electoral competition is less than previously supposed and is non-linear. Yet, as the conventional marginality·hypothesis suggests, electoral competition does encourage responsiveness.

NOTES

1. Although only two groups are explicitly included in the constituency influence model, this should not be interpreted as limiting the model's general applicability. Since the two groups included in the model may be thought of as two coalitions of groups and since groups side either for or against particular issue positions, the model may actually accommodate multiple constituency groups. Moreover, the model may take overlapping memberships into account by making appropriate adjustments in the coalitions' possible effects (i.e., x and z) on the representative's re-election chances.

2. Several of Fiorina's original assumptions about the model have been changed. First, the assumption that a group's ability to hurt re-election chances is necessarily greater than its ability to help those chances is removed. Second, unlike Fiorina (1974:34), this analysis assumes that the only limit that may be imposed on the size of the x's and z's is that the <u>net</u> effect on p must keep p within the range of one to zero. Third, the assumption that p* "tracks" p (37-38) is unnecessarily restrictive and has been removed. Although some tracking probably does take place, it does not necessarily take place or create a convergence of p and p*.

3. This is the general notion of a maximizer, however a satisficing strategy may produce the same strategy $(Q = 1)$ as a maximizer if, $p^* - p = c_1 x_1 - c_2 z_2$.

4. The group boundaries may be defined by their support or opposition to particular policy positions. The strength of a group may be estimated by (cx + cz) for each group. This differs from Fiorina's definition by examining mobilized group strength rather than potential group strength.

5. Like Eulau and Karps (1977) and Kuklinski (1979), I distinguish between responsiveness and congruence. Congruence is any agreement between the representative and his constituency. Responsiveness is the intention to produce congruence. Thus, responsiveness may not be the sole source of congruence but, all things being equal (i.e., all complicating conditions and spurious causes of congruence such as belief-sharing), equal rates of responsiveness should produce equal rates of congruence.

6. The impact of salience on constituency influence has been examined elsewhere (Kuklinski and McCrone, 1978). However, salience has been viewed as an issue attribute rather than as the product of interaction between issues and individual or groups of voters. The result is that issues that are generally salient have been contrasted with those that are not, but the effects of salience on interpreting opinion for a single issue has been neglected. Thus, the problem of minorities who consider the issue salient and majorities who think it unimportant is overlooked.

7. Particularly important in this regard is the availability of attractive and viable opposing candidates either within the representative's own party or in opposing parties.

8. The idea of responsiveness should not be limited to

the realm of lawmaking. As Eulau and Karps (1977) note responsiveness may take many forms. Thus, a broad interpretation should be given to "issues."

9. In a strict sense v cannot take a value that would cause Q to exceed one or fall below zero.

10. Given the great many concerns that even those in the most heterogeneous district share, the most heterogeneous may not be extremely heterogeneous in an absolute sense.

11. The constraints on the marginals depends greatly on the nature of the relationship between marginality and heterogeneity. This analysis presumes that the typical marginal district is not extremely heterogeneous and the typical safe district is not extremely homogeneous. Only a modest relationship is presumed. That is, it is assumed that if homogeneity were regressed on electoral security, the slope would be less than one. If the slope were greater than one, it would be evidence of drastic constraints on marginal districts and the very marginal would be even less responsive than the moderately marginal.

12. The lower limit of p for this analysis is the random probability (in a two candidate field the lower limit is .5). Given some rationalization, the demonstrated ability to win the office, and the advantages of incumbency, the probability of re-election should seldom fall much below the random probability level.

13. This presents another possible problem for the study of the marginality-responsiveness relationship. There is no reason to suppose that all representatives reach the same equilibrium or follow a precise pattern. Thus, even when most measurable and relevant considerations are held equal some variation around the curve should exist.

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