

Throw the bums out: competition and accountability in congressional elections

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Abstract

In a representative democracy, electoral incentives are supposed to ensure political accountability. In this chapter I examine whether constituents who oppose their legislators' positions are more likely to have an unfavorable opinion of the incumbent. To do so, I utilize multi-level modeling techniques and data that directly capture whether a citizen agrees with the position his representative has taken across a wide range of policy debates. I find that incumbents are sanctioned by voters who disagree with their positions, but that this sanctioning is stronger when electoral competition is robust and varies by the type of policy debate at stake.

1 Competition and Political Accountability

U.S. Congressional elections are marked by remarkably high levels of electoral security. Over the postwar period, 93 percent of incumbents, on average, are reelected each election cycle (Jacobson 2004). In 2004, 98 percent who ran again for the House of Representatives won — 64 incumbents went unchallenged. Even in 2006, a year which saw significant partisan turnover and higher than normal rates of incumbent defeat, 81 percent of seats were rated as safe for the incumbent's party. The lack of political competition, low voter turnout in midterm elections, and the fact that citizens appear to know very little about their representatives' legislative records would appear call into question the robustness of electoral institutions in promoting democratic accountability and the representation of citizen interests.

But if incumbents are generally safe, their behavior suggests otherwise. Incumbents spend a substantial amount of time tracking public opinion and analyzing constituent correspondence (Maestas 2003). They monitor how they are covered by the news media (Cook 1989). Even

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incumbents' websites demonstrate a substantial concern with reelection (Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer 1998).

Why incumbents act as if they are insecure despite evidence to the contrary is resolved, in part, by the fact that incumbents have strong incentives to be attentive to constituent preferences even if citizens are not actively monitoring their actions. Incumbents always face the possibility that an inattentive public can be transformed into a very attentive one. The media, interest groups, and challengers, can all awaken the public from its slumber by raising issues where the incumbent is out of step with the district's preferences (Hutchings 2003). This has only been aided by the prevalence of public opinion data, which have made it easier for political elites to identify the public's preferences (Geer 1996) and enhanced the ability of the governed to become aware of each other's opinions independent of political authorities (Manin 1997). As a result, scholars have long argued that legislators are quite sensitive to voters' expected reactions to their positions on issues (Arnold 1990; Fenno 1978; Fiorina 1973; Geer 1996; Key 1966; Kingdon 1989).

In this chapter, I assess whether competition in congressional elections meets the minimal democratic standard for political accountability. That is, I ask whether constituents who oppose their legislators' positions and actions are more likely to have an unfavorable opinion of the incumbent and consequently vote them out of office, and whether this sanctioning is stronger when electoral competition is robust. To do so, I utilize data that directly capture whether a voter agrees with the position his representative has taken across a wide range of policy debates.

I argue that the strength of connection between policy disagreement and incumbent approval is conditional on three important dimensions. First, it matters little if an individual disagrees with how his representative voted, if on that policy debate, the candidates themselves do not differ from one another. Policy disagreements are only consequential if political choices are offered (Downs 1957; Key 1966). Second, given that citizens know little to nothing about their legislator's roll-call votes (Alvarez and Gronke 1996; Stokes and Miller 1962; Hutchings 2003; Wilson and Gronke 2000) and about the policy process more generally (Carpini and Keeter 1996), I expect this relationship to be stronger in competitive electoral contexts where elites publicize particular policy disagreements. Finally, whether constituents care about policy disagreement is also expected to be a function of the salience of the issue (Hutchings 2003). Voters are unlikely to sanction an incumbent for voting a particular way on an issue that flies well below the radar and is not seen by elites to substantially affect the interests of large numbers of voters or smaller, but politically significant, groups.

I test these hypotheses with multi-level modeling techniques. I find that policy disagreements between constituent and representative affect an incumbent's approval rating and the likelihood that constituents vote to keep her in office, but that such relationships are stronger when electoral competition is robust and vary across the type of policy debate at stake. The next section discusses the data and methods used in this chapter and details model specification decisions. Sections 3 and 4 present the analyses of incumbent approval and vote choice, respectively. Section 5 discusses these results and their implications for debates over the competitiveness of congressional elections.

2 Data and Methods

In this chapter I draw upon the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere 2007). This survey offers two key advantages for testing my hypotheses. First, the survey of 36,501 individuals is large enough to measure public opinion within legislative constituencies and capture variation across electoral contexts. Second, survey items were designed with scholarly questions about political accountability and policy representation in mind. I utilize the pre- and post-election surveys that were fielded by Polimetrix in October and November 2006, respectively. The survey sample is drawn from a national sample stratified on the following: registered and unregistered voters, state size, and competitive and uncompetitive congressional districts. In particular, the sample allows scholars to assess differences between competitive and uncompetitive races (Ansolabehere 2007).¹ In the end, my analyses utilize a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults including 36,403 individuals across all 435 districts, with an average of 92 respondents per congressional district.

2.1 Dependent Variables

Governments are accountable if citizens can distinguish representative and unrepresentative governments and sanction appropriately, reelecting incumbents who are representative of their interests and throwing them out of office if they are not (Stokes, Manin, and Przeworski 1999). For these reasons, I look at an individual's approval of the incumbent (asked in the pre-election wave) and whether they voted for the incumbent or the incumbent's party (asked in the post-

¹As the survey was conducted over the Internet, Polimetrix used matched random sampling to alleviate problems with the non-representativeness of Internet surveys (Malhotra and Krosnick 2007). All results reported in this paper also utilize the sampling weights provided by Polimetrix. Additional detail on the Polimetrix's matched sampling procedures can be found in Ansolabehere (2007) and Rivers (2006).

election wave). *Approval* is a five-point scale, ranging from a low of “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve.”² *Vote* is coded as 1 if the respondent voted for the incumbent or incumbent’s party, and 0 if he voted for the challenger.

2.2 Independent Variables

My primary independent variable of interest is whether or not the constituent would have voted the same way that his representative voted on seven separate issues, *Policy agreement*. That is, for each issue the survey respondent is coded 1 for being in policy agreement, -1 if he is in policy disagreement with the incumbent’s position, and 0 if he did not take a position. Respondents were asked how they would have voted on particular pieces of legislation that had already been considered by members of Congress. These included votes on: (1) federal funding of stem cell research, (2) banning partial-birth abortions, (3) providing a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, (4) passing the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), (5) increasing the federal minimum wage, (6) extending President Bush’s capital gains tax cut, and (7) setting a timetable for withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq. Roll-call votes were collected for members of the House of Representatives and matched with each constituent’s stated position.³ Considering only the opinions of those respondents who took a firm position, the mean level of district agreement ranged from a low of .43 (minimum wage increase) to .59 (partial-birth abortion ban).⁴ There was also variation in the number of respondents who answered “don’t know” when asked how they would have voted. This ranged from a high of 22 percent on the issue of CAFTA to a low of 5 percent regarding increases in the minimum wage. Therefore, I also include a dummy indicator for *Don’t know* responses.

Although roll-call votes were available on all seven issues, the question of raising the minimum wage posed a particular problem since the bill passed by the House in July 2006 was not considered a “clean bill.” Designed by GOP leaders to put moderate Democrats in an uncomfortable position and Republicans on record as supporting an increase in the minimum wage, the bill paired an increase in the minimum wage with extension of the estate tax cut. The roll-call vote fell largely along party lines, with 158 Democrats voting nay.⁵ For this issue I coded an

²To ease interpretation of results, this measure is treated as a continuous variable; results when estimated as an ordinal categorical variable remain substantively the same.

³While this measure is potentially endogenous with both dependent variables – in that individuals who are more approving of the incumbent or who voted for her, change their policy preference to match the incumbent’s position – this possibility seems remote. Details on these roll-call votes are included in the appendix.

⁴Mean district agreement with the incumbent’s position is considerably lower if the average includes respondents who offered no opinion on how they would have voted.

⁵The bill later died in the Senate after failing a cloture motion that would have allowed the Senate to take the

incumbent as supporting the minimum wage increase if she was a co-sponsor of a stand-alone minimum wage bill, H.R. 2429 sponsored by Rep. Miller (D-CA).⁶ This piece of legislation was co-sponsored by 142 Democrats, 1 Republican and 1 Independent. At the individual-level, I also control for whether the individual identifies with the incumbent's party (*SamePID*), *Age*, *Education*, *Income*, and dummy indicators for whether the respondent is *Black*, *Hispanic* or *Female*, and whether he is a *Homeowner*.

District-level independent variables include the *Seniority* of the incumbent, the electoral *Safety* of the district, the change in competitiveness over the course of the 2006 race (Δ *Comp*), *Challenger Spending* (logged), and dummy indicators for whether the MC was involved in a *Scandal*, and, in the case of the vote models, whether the incumbent ran in the 2006 midterm election (*Open seat*). The seniority of the member is measured in years. Electoral safety is measured using the incumbent's (or incumbent's party) vote share from the previous election ($| 50 - \text{voteshare}_{2004} |$).⁷ The competitiveness of the congressional election is captured by two different measures. First, and most relevant to my hypotheses, I include the level of challenger's campaign spending.⁸ Districts where challengers languish in obscurity are generally not competitive (Jacobson 1990). Substantial campaign spending is virtually a prerequisite for any challenger who wants to increase her name recognition and familiarity within the district; challengers also need resources to publicize incumbent's positions that are out-of-step with district opinion. Second, to capture the unusual and unexpected late swing toward the Democrats that took place during the last month of the election (Ansolabehere 2007), I measure the swing in Cook's Political Report ratings from April 24, 2006 to October 31, 2006. Higher values on this measure indicate a tightening of the race over the course of the campaign.⁹ Descriptive statistics on all these measures are included in the appendix.

The relationship between policy agreement and district competitiveness is not as direct as we might initially believe: policy agreement is not necessarily higher in less competitive or more homogenous districts. Figures 1 and 2 plot the mean level of district agreement against the electoral safety of the district.¹⁰ While the slope between the two in each graph is slightly

bill up for consideration.

⁶This bill was introduced on May 18, 2005.

⁷I also considered the partisan homogeneity of the district, measured in much the same way as electoral safety, but by using the average of Bush's vote shares from the 2000 and 2004 elections as proxies for district partisanship. Results were essentially the same whether I used a measure of the district's "normal vote" or the incumbent's vote share from the previous election.

⁸This measure is logged. Spending figures come from the 2008 Almanac of American Politics.

⁹The correlation between both measures of competitiveness is modest, $\rho=.26$.

¹⁰Similar relationships exist when comparing mean levels of policy agreement to a measure of the district's "normal vote". Figures 1 and 2 take into account all respondents, including those not offering an opinion on how they would

positive, there is also substantial variation in policy agreement across electoral contexts and by issue debate. Whether there are strong relationships between evaluations of the incumbent, policy agreement, and electoral competition remains to be seen.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

2.3 Multi-level model of incumbent approval

These data have a multi-level structure with survey respondents nested within congressional districts. This structure presents particular statistical challenges including nonconstant variance across contextual units and clustering within them, which can result in downwardly biased standard errors (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Standard approaches to these challenges also present their problems. Fixed effects models (e.g., including a dummy for each contextual unit) that capture unit-specific heterogeneity take up too many degrees of freedom and do not allow us to draw theoretically interesting inferences about contextual heterogeneity. Interactive models (even those correcting for clustering using robust standard errors) impose the statistical assumption that contextual variables explain all variance across contextual units (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). To address these challenges, I employ multi-level modeling techniques. That is, I model a dependent variable captured at the individual level (level-one) as a function of level-one independent variables, a level-one disturbance term, r_{ij} , district-level (level-two) independent variables and a level-two disturbance term, u_j . In this way I am able to decompose the variance in my dependent variable into that explained at the individual and contextual levels. The inclusion of u_j , allows for residual contextual variance.

To assess whether district-level variance makes an independent contribution to variance in incumbent approval, I estimate a random effects ANOVA model. This model can be written as:

$$approval_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \mu_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

where γ_{00} is the grand mean of approval, r_{ij} captures individual-level variance and μ_{0j} captures district-level variance. As shown in Table 1, there is statistically significant variance at the district-level, with approximately 4 percent of the variance in the dependent variable explained by district-level variance. Although this amount may seem trivial, it is comparable to other studies of political behavior (Rahn and Rudolph 2005), and is to be expected given

have voted. Including only those who offered a firm position merely shifts the intercept up, but does not change the slope between district agreement and electoral safety.

that the bulk of measurement error is captured at the individual level (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). Moreover, these findings give some evidence that electoral context affects the potential for political accountability, a key question for studies of political representation.

[Table 1 about here]

As I find that district-level variance makes an independent contribution to variance in incumbent approval, I estimate several multi-level models that test my theoretical expectations. In particular, I compare the results of three different models, each building on the prior: (1) including only level-1 variables and allowing the intercept to randomly vary across districts, (2) including level-2 variables in the intercept equation, and (3) including level-2 variables in both the intercept and selected slope equations. For these three models, I estimate approval of the incumbent as a function of policy disagreement over whether to set a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq. In the next section I present the results of the fully specified model for each policy issue separately.

Model 1 can be written as:

$$\begin{aligned} approval_{ij} = & \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 Iraq + \beta_2 Don'tknow + \beta_3 SamePID + \beta_4 Education \\ & + \beta_5 Age + \beta_6 Income + \beta_7 Black + \beta_8 Hispanic \\ & + \beta_9 Female + \beta_{10} Homeowner + r_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

The j subscript on β_{0j} indicates that the intercept randomly varies across districts:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \mu_{0j}$$

Model 2 adds level-two covariates to intercept equation:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} Safety + \gamma_{02} Scandal + \gamma_{03} Seniority + \mu_{0j}$$

Specifically, I expect that incumbents in districts where the member is more senior and faces a more politically secure district will have higher levels of constituent approval. Conversely, incumbents plagued by scandal should have lower levels of constituent approval.

Model 3 allows four of the level-1 coefficients to vary across districts: the slopes on the

dummy indicators for whether the respondent is black, Hispanic or female, and, most significantly, the coefficient on policy disagreement regarding U.S. troops in Iraq. The level-1 and intercept equations remain the same as before. However, I now include the following cross-level interactions:

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}\Delta Comp + \gamma_{12}Seniority + \gamma_{13}Chal.Spending + \mu_{1j}$$

$$\beta_7 = \gamma_{70} + \gamma_{71}MCblack$$

$$\beta_8 = \gamma_{80} + \gamma_{81}MChispanic$$

$$\beta_9 = \gamma_{90} + \gamma_{91}MCfemale$$

The first models the slope on policy agreement on Iraq troop withdrawal as a function of competitiveness over the course of the 2006 campaign, seniority, and challenger campaign spending. I allow residual contextual variation in this slope, indicated by μ_{2j} . In this way, I am able to compare the amount of variance in this randomly varying slope explained by the inclusion of level-2 covariates.¹¹ We might expect that senior members have developed stronger trust relationships with their constituents and thus have greater policy leeway (Bianco 1994). I hypothesize that policy disagreement will hold more weight when electoral competition is strong. While activists have strong incentives to monitor legislators and alert constituents when incumbents are out of step with district opinion, challengers may have the strongest incentive to facilitate this indirect oversight (Arnold 1993, 409). Other research has found that issues are more likely to be defined in competitive electoral contexts (Kahn and Kenney 1999). For these reasons, awareness of policy disagreement is likely to be higher in competitive districts.

The next three address the question of whether individuals who are descriptively represented are more approving of the incumbent. I include dummy indicators for whether the MC is black, Hispanic or female in the relevant slope equation. All models are estimated using HLM6, resulting in empirical Bayes estimates of the randomly varying level-1 coefficients, generalized least-squares estimates of the fixed effects, and restricted maximum likelihood estimates of the variance and covariance components (Raudenbush, Bryk, and Congdon 2000).

¹¹Specifically, I compare the results of letting the slope on policy agreement randomly vary without any level-2 covariates (results not shown due to space considerations) to this last model.

The results for each of these models are shown in Table 2. As expected, individuals who are co-partisans have a higher approval of the incumbent's performance in office. Even after controlling for shared partisanship, however, agreement over whether to keep troops in Iraq increases approval, with an effect that is roughly half in magnitude to that of shared partisanship. Ambivalence over the issue of troops in Iraq has no statistically significant effect on evaluations of the incumbent. Finally, women and blacks appear to be more approving of the incumbent. Model 1, which allows the intercept to randomly vary across districts, explains roughly 8 percent of the district-level variance in incumbent approval and approximately 25 percent of the individual-level variance in approval.¹²

Model 2 adds level-2 covariates to the intercept equation. That is, the mean level of approval of the incumbent is allowed to randomly vary as a function of seniority, scandal, and electoral safety. We see that incumbents involved in a scandal have a lower average approval rating. Neither seniority nor the incumbent's electoral margins from the previous election have a statistically significant effect on approval. This model explains roughly 25 and 13 percent of the variance at the individual and district levels, respectively. By comparing the τ_{00} estimate from the random intercept model that includes level-two covariates (Model 2) to one that does not (Model 1), we see that district-level predictors account for 6 percent of the district-level variance in incumbent evaluations.

[Table 2 about here]

Model 3 tests the four cross-level interactions. First, only blacks who are descriptively represented have a higher approval rating of their representative. Descriptive representation of women and Hispanics does not appear to increase incumbent approval among these two groups. Most significantly, I find that the link between policy agreement and approval does indeed vary across electoral contexts. The coefficient on policy agreement is larger in districts where the election grew more competitive over the course of the 2006 election season. Likewise, the relationship between policy agreement and incumbent approval is stronger when challenger spending is higher. Both findings indicate that citizens place greater weight on their policy disagreements when electoral competition is robust.

¹²This is calculated from the τ_{00} estimates in Table 2 and Model 1 in Table 3: $([.072-.073]/.072)$. and from the σ^2 estimates in Table 2 and Model 1 in Table 3: $([1.79-1.35]/1.79)$.

3 Incumbent Approval

That citizens' evaluation of the incumbent were more heavily influenced by policy agreement over Iraq in electorally competitive districts is as expected, given the role that the Iraq war played in the 2006 election and the fact that many Democratic challengers made "ending the war" a major campaign issue. Do similarly strong relationships emerge between electoral competition, incumbent evaluation, and policy disagreements when other policy debates are considered? Moreover, do we see systematic patterns in the relationships based on the *type* of policy?

Studies of legislative responsiveness suggest that representatives have stronger incentives to pay attention to constituent opinion regarding some issue areas more than others. In what has become a classic work on legislative responsiveness, Miller and Stokes 1963 found that the strongest correlations between constituency preferences and legislators' behavior were found for civil rights policy; recent studies have upheld their original finding that mass opinion exerts little influence on foreign policymaking (Jacobs and Page 2005). Multiple studies also suggest that representatives have stronger incentives to be responsive on salient issues (Arnold 1990; Kingdon 1989; Monroe 1998; Wlezien 2004). Policy signals from the public are presumed to be clearer on "easy" issues that are symbolic, have been on the issue agenda for some time, and where there is substantial citizen involvement (Carmines and Stimson 1980).

Nevertheless, many of these hypothesized relationships between type of policy and pattern of responsiveness are based upon expectations about voter behavior. Therefore, I turn this analysis around by comparing the effect of policy disagreement in various issue domains on incumbent evaluations and vote choice. Are voters more likely to sanction incumbents who are "out-of-step" on some issues compared to others?

The issues considered in this chapter differ in a number of ways. First, there are issues that are defined by party cleavages: social welfare issues such as the capital gains tax cut and the minimum wage increase, and cultural debates, including whether to ban partial birth abortions and fund stem cell research. Others, specifically trade policy (CAFTA) and immigration, cut across party coalitions. Second, issues differ in the length of time they have been on the agenda. For example, the debate over stem cell research is relatively new whereas abortion policy has been debated for over three decades. Finally, although all the issues considered here can be considered salient, some issues are less salient (CAFTA) than others (Iraq troop withdrawal).

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of this analysis. The coefficient on policy agreement is largest on the issue of Iraq troop withdrawal (.353), and weakest on the cross-cutting issues of

immigration (.202) and CAFTA (.071).¹³ While I do find that the effect of policy agreement varies across electoral contexts, how it varies is also affected by the nature of the policy debate at stake. For example, seniority has little to no effect on the slope of policy agreement, with the exception of the question of banning partial birth abortions. On this issue, the effect of policy agreement on approval is weaker for incumbents who are more senior, suggesting that, at least on this issue, their constituents give them more policy leeway.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here]

The size of the coefficient on policy agreement is also larger in districts where the race tightened over the course of the election. Not surprisingly, the largest increase is seen on policy agreement or disagreement on whether Congress should set a timetable for withdrawing troops out of Iraq. Indeed, this debate was a major campaign issue in many of the tightest races. Challenger spending – as a proxy for the competitiveness of the race, in general, and as a marker of challengers highlighting policy disagreements, in particular – strengthens the relationship between policy agreement and incumbent approval for most, but not all, issue debates (the exceptions being the cross-cutting issues of immigration reform and passage of CAFTA). For example, while the effect of disagreement over increasing the minimum wage is more than 150 percent larger when challenger spending is increased to its maximum, there is no evidence that challengers’ actions are more consequential when party labels do not serve as a reliable indicators of the incumbent’s position. Policy disagreements over whether to provide federal funds for stem cell research appear to be immune from electoral context. Finally, individuals who are more ambivalent about particular policy debates are generally more approving of the incumbent than those have a firm opinion on specific legislative battles.

4 Vote for the Incumbent

On one hand, congressional elections are generally seen to be more about incumbency than partisanship or issue preferences. On the other hand, there is substantial (although varied) evidence of legislative responsiveness (Achen 1978; Bartels 1991; Clinton 2006; DeBoef and Stimson 1995; Erikson 1978; Hill and Hurley 1999; Hurley and Hill 2003; Miller and Stokes 1963; Weissberg 1979). But if the U.S. House of Representatives is, as De Boef and Stimson conclude, a “remarkably responsive institution” (1995, 646), we presume it to be so because representatives

¹³The coefficient is also lower for agreement on increasing the minimum wage. However, since this measure is not constructed from the roll-call votes of incumbents, it is not directly comparable with the other issues.

fear electoral sanction and are to some extent held accountable for their legislative record. I now turn to the question of whether citizens punish incumbents who are less responsive to their policy preferences.

Given that my dependent variable (vote for the incumbent) is dichotomous, I use a hierarchical generalized linear model, estimated with a logistic link function. The interpretation of results remains largely the same as in the previous section. Table 5 and 6 show the results of this analysis, again broken down by issue debate.

[Tables 5 and 6 about here]

First, across all issues, policy agreement has a significantly significant effect on the probability of voting for the incumbent. That is, individuals who would have voted differently than how the incumbent actually did are more likely to vote her out of office. This relationship is strongest for funding stem cell research, extending the capital gains tax cut and setting a timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq and weakest on the cross-cutting issues of immigration reform and trade policy (CAFTA). Unlike evaluations of the incumbent, however, ambivalence regarding particular issue debates has no effect on the probability of voting for the incumbent or incumbent's party.

Electoral context also matters. The intercept equation estimates the average district vote for the incumbent's party as a function of electoral competition, scandal, seniority, and whether the seat was contested by an incumbent. As expected, incumbents in more electorally secure districts have a higher average vote share, while those who faced scandal charges are more unpopular.¹⁴ While senior members do not enjoy a higher average district vote share, we do see that, in 2006 at least, the challenger's party fared better in open seat contests.

The cross-level interaction of interest is whether the effect of policy agreement significantly varies across electoral contexts and in theoretically expected ways.¹⁵ First, I find statistically significant district-level variation in the slope on policy agreement for all seven policy issues.¹⁶ And this variation is indeed a function of the electoral context: the strength of connection between the probability of voting for the incumbent and policy agreement is stronger in districts where electoral competition is robust. Nevertheless, the role of electoral context continues to differ by the type of policy debate at stake. For example, seniority weakens the electoral

¹⁴Once again, the effect of electoral security remains substantively the same regardless of whether one uses previous vote margin of the incumbent's party or some measure of the "normal vote" taken from presidential election returns.

¹⁵Cross-level interactions testing the effects of descriptive representation are not included in the vote models since open seat races are included in this analysis.

¹⁶The results of this analysis are not shown due to space considerations.

connection on cultural issues (banning partial birth abortions and federally funding stem cell research). Only on these issues, is a more senior incumbent less likely to be sanctioned by constituents who disagree with her position. On nearly all other issues (the exceptions being CAFTA and stem cell funding) constituents placed greater weight on their policy positions in districts where the race grew closer. And, once again, challenger spending strengthens the relationship policy agreement and a vote for the incumbent on all issues except the stem cell debate and the cross-cutting issues of CAFTA and immigration reform. While individuals who disagree with the incumbent's position on stem cell research are considerably less likely to vote to keep the incumbent or incumbent's party in office, this sanctioning is impervious to electoral context.

To assess the relative effects of electoral competition on voter sanctioning of out-of-step incumbents, Figures 3 and 4 plot the change in predicted probabilities of voting for the incumbent or incumbent's party while varying measures of electoral competitiveness. Figure 3 plots the change in predicted probability moving from an uncompetitive district to one where the race tightened over the course of the 2006 campaign. For example, individuals living in competitive districts who disagree with the incumbent's position on Iraq are thirty percentage points less likely to vote for the incumbent than individuals who likewise disagree with their incumbent's position but live in safe districts. Figure 4 shows similar changes in the predicted probability of voting for the incumbent, but now shifting challenger spending from its minimum to maximum. There is a roughly ten percentage point difference in the probability of voting for the incumbent between these two electoral contexts when the voter disagrees with the incumbent's position on increasing the minimum wage and extending the capital gains tax cut. All else equal, challenger spending decreases the probability of voting for the party of the incumbent among those who disagree with their representative's position on raising the minimum wage by as much as fifteen percentage points.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

5 Discussion

Democratic theorists have long argued that while constituents exert little direct control over their representatives, electoral incentives ensure political accountability (Dahl 1956, 1961; Downs 1957; Schumpeter 1994). In this chapter, I examined the strength of the "electoral connection" by testing whether (1) citizens punish incumbents who are less responsive to their

policy preferences, (2) this sanctioning is affected by the robustness of electoral competition and (3) if it differs by the type of policy disagreement at stake.

Supporting democratic theories of political accountability, voters were more likely to sanction incumbents they disagree with regardless of the policy debate at stake. This sanctioning was weakest, however, on issues that cross-cut established party cleavages, perhaps suggesting that voters use party labels as a heuristic to gauge responsiveness to their preferences. Ambivalence or uncertainty about policy debates increased support for the incumbent for most policy debates (the exceptions being immigration and abortion policies). However, the role of ambivalence was much weaker in the vote models: answering “don’t know” on banning partial birth abortions decreased the probability of voting for the incumbent, while having no opinion on providing federal funding to stem cell research actually increased support for the incumbent.

Moreover, electoral competition increased the weight individuals placed on policy disagreement. Across issue debates there was a 5 to 30 percentage point difference in support for the incumbent between those living in electorally safe compared to competitive districts. The one exception here was disagreement over whether to use federal dollars to fund embryonic stem cell research. Although voters who disagreed with their representative’s position on this issue were more likely to sanction the incumbent, this sanctioning was impervious to electoral context. In other words, awareness of policy disagreement was not contingent upon the actions of challengers. Finally, the extent of sanctioning varied by issue. For one, more senior incumbents were found to have greater policy leeway when it came to disagreements over cultural issues. On the other hand, the effect of disagreement over one of the major debates in the 2006 midterm elections – the Iraq War – was highly sensitive to the competitiveness of the election. The weakest links between electoral context, policy agreement, and incumbent evaluations were found for the cross-cutting issues of trade and immigration reform.

I hypothesized that the extent of sanctioning unresponsive legislative behavior is conditional upon whether political choices are offered, voters are made aware of policy disagreements, and on the salience of the issue debate at stake. All seven issues considered in this chapter were ones where the parties have generally staked out competing positions. On the two issues where the lines are more blurred – immigration reform and trade policy – policy disagreements do indeed hold less weight on incumbent evaluations. I also find indirect support for the hypothesis that challengers play an important role in bringing policy disagreements to light. Sanctioning of unresponsive incumbents was more likely to occur when the election was strongly contested by a challenger. Although I have not included any measure capturing challengers’ campaign agendas,

it appears that challengers facilitate indirect oversight of the incumbent. Finally, I expected that sanctioning would be greater on more salient issues. Although all seven issues may be considered relatively salient, some are clearly more so than others (e.g., passage of CAFTA compared to debate over Iraq), and this is reflected in the results presented in this chapter.

Across these seven models, I was able to explain between 12 and 23 percent of the district-level variance in approval.¹⁷ None of these models, however, were found to fully explain the district-level variance in the effect of policy agreement on incumbent evaluations. In all cases the variance component for the policy agreement slope remained statistically significant. I suspect this is because I have not adequately captured variance in salience across districts. For example, voters in border states or who have witnessed significant growth in their locale's immigrant population, may be more likely to hold their representatives accountable for their positions on immigration reform. Overall, though, these results suggest important differences between voters in competitive and uncompetitive contexts.

Many have expressed concerns about declining levels of competition in House elections. Some states have gone so far as to suggest using redistricting to promote more competitive districts or implementing campaign finance reforms to create a more equal playing field between incumbents and challengers. Yet, debate over whether electoral competition promotes greater responsiveness remains (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992; Erikson and Wright 2005; Fiorina 1973; Griffin 2006). To date, most empirical studies focus exclusively on aggregate-level relationships. Finding that representatives from competitive districts are more responsiveness to constituency preferences, Griffin concludes: "Future investigations might build on this evidence by improving our understanding of *how* competitiveness produces responsiveness" (2006, 920, emphasis added). These results suggest that voters in electorally competitive districts are more likely to act in ways that create incentives for legislative responsiveness.

¹⁷Similar calculations are not available for the logit models.

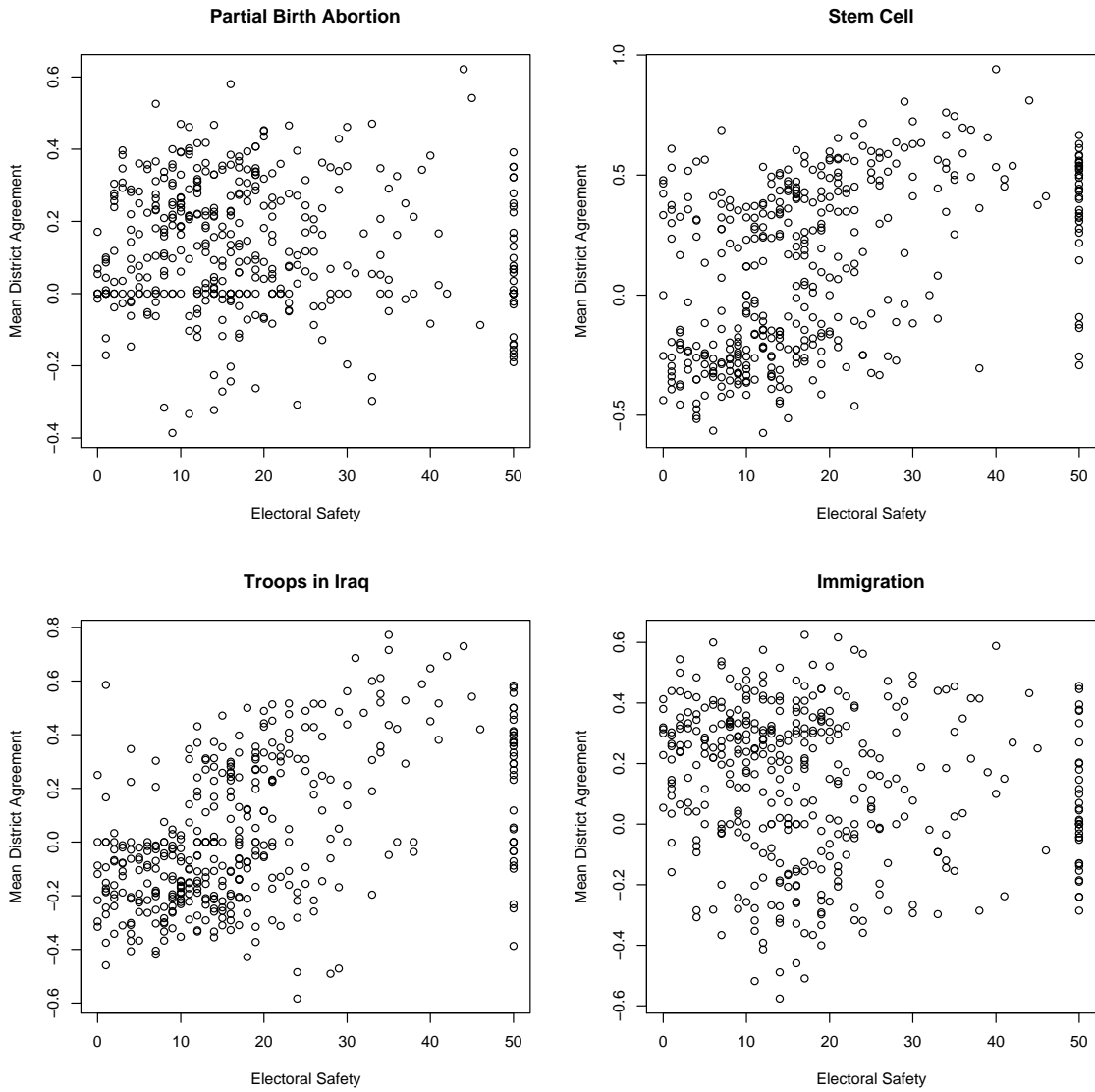


Figure 1: Relationship between mean policy agreement and electoral safety

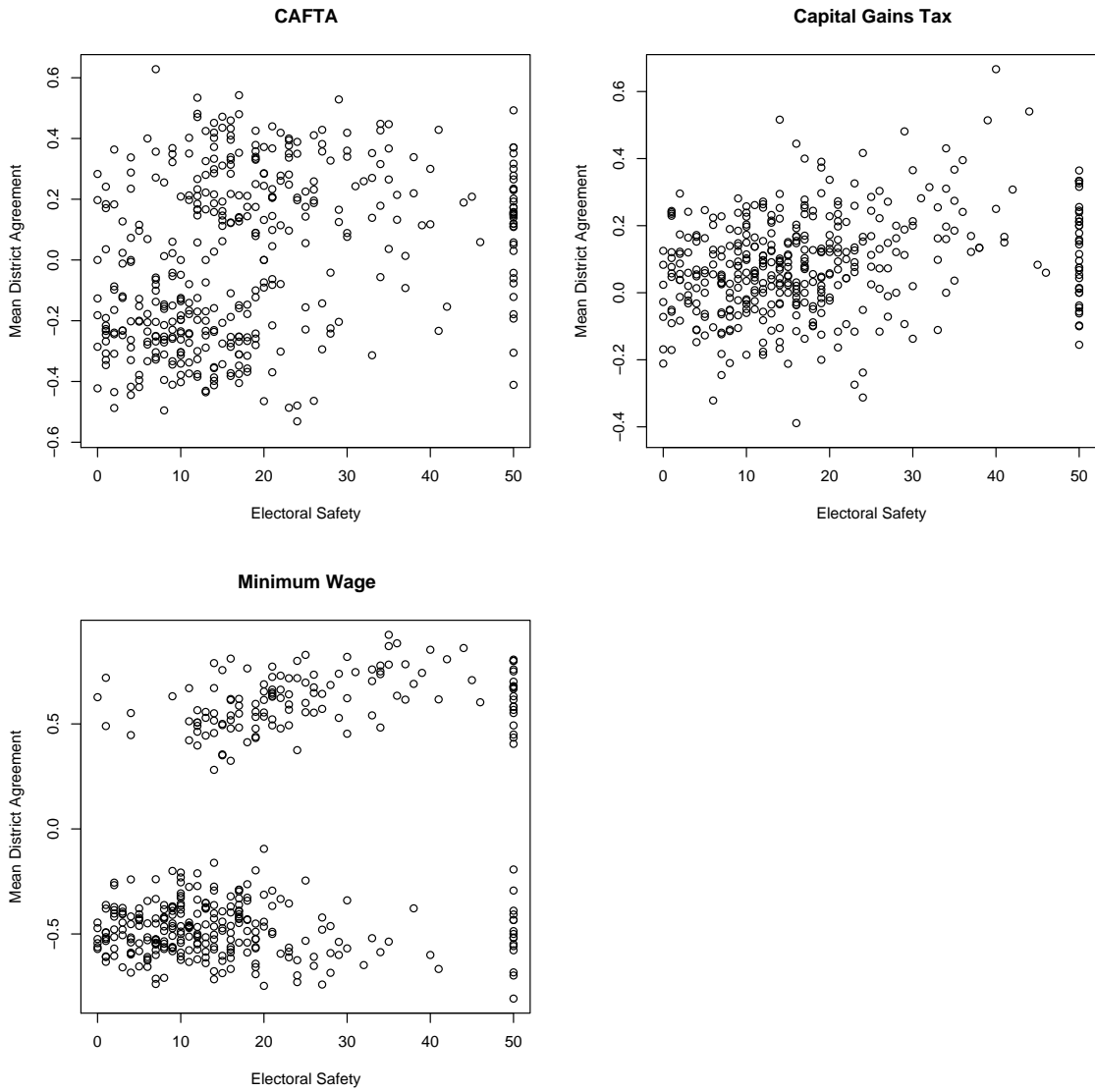


Figure 2: Relationship between mean policy agreement and electoral safety

Table 1: Analysis of Variance for Approval of the Incumbent

Parameter	Estimate
<i>Fixed Effects</i>	3.194*** (0.015)
<i>Variance Components</i>	
District-level (γ_{00})	0.078 ^a
Individual-level (σ^2)	1.789
-2 X Log Likelihood	124,663

^a $\chi^2_{df(434)}=2047, p<.001$

*** p<.001

Table 2: Approval of the Incumbent & Policy disagreement over Iraq

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	2.838***	2.820***	2.824***
Safety (γ_{01})		0.001	0.002
Scandal (γ_{02})		-0.370***	-0.314***
Seniority (γ_{03})		0.000	0.000
Intercept (γ_{10})	0.434***	0.433***	0.353***
Δ Comp (γ_{11})			0.155***
Seniority (γ_{12})			-0.001
Chal. \$ (log) (γ_{13})			0.008**
Intercept (γ_{20})	0.032	0.0324	0.046*
Same PID	0.838***	0.838***	0.725***
Education	-0.004	-0.004	-0.005
Age	0.001	0.001	0.001
Income	-0.003	-0.003	-0.002
Black	0.079***	0.0757**	0.035
MC Black (γ_{71})			0.224***
Hispanic	-0.0110	-0.012	-0.010
MC Hispanic (γ_{81})			0.056
Female	0.0580***	0.058***	0.061***
MC Female (γ_{91})			-0.017
Homeowner	0.0244	0.025	0.032*
<i>Variance Components</i>			
Individual	1.346	1.346	1.264
District	0.072	0.068	0.065
Policy Agreement			0.092 ^a
Number of level - 1 units	33,055	33,055	33,055
Number of level - 2 units	435	435	435
-2 X Log Likelihood	104,391	104,395	103,053

*p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.
Variance component significant at p<.001.

Table 3: Approval of the Incumbent

	Abortion	Stem Cell	Immigration	CAFTA
Intercept	2.610*** (0.048)	2.711*** (0.047)	2.595*** (0.047)	2.599*** (0.047)
Safety (γ_{01})	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
Scandal (γ_{02})	-0.509*** (0.096)	-0.2741** (0.110)	-0.492*** (0.086)	-0.438*** (0.089)
Seniority (γ_{03})	0.004** (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)	0.005*** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Intercept (γ_{10})	0.303*** (0.041)	0.349*** (0.044)	0.202*** (0.029)	0.071*** (0.025)
Δ Comp (γ_{11})	0.068** (0.026)	-0.065 (0.058)	0.061** (0.027)	0.057*** (0.021)
Seniority (γ_{12})	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.001)
Chal. \$ (log) (γ_{13})	0.008*** (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Don't Know	-0.021 (0.025)	0.126*** (0.021)	0.025 (0.022)	0.052*** (0.017)
Same PID	0.921*** (0.024)	0.796*** (0.022)	1.011*** (0.025)	1.088*** (0.025)
Education	0.005 (0.007)	0.001 (0.006)	0.001 (0.007)	0.000 (0.007)
Age	0.002** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)
Income	0.000 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	0.000 (0.003)
Black	0.006 (0.030)	-0.006 (0.028)	-0.015 (0.029)	-0.0210 (0.029)
Hispanic	0.391*** (0.079)	0.378*** (0.076)	0.387*** (0.075)	0.332*** (0.076)
Female	-0.043 (0.032)	-0.030 (0.029)	-0.028 (0.032)	-0.052* (0.031)
Homeowner	0.154*** (0.052)	0.079 (0.059)	0.007 (0.063)	0.050 (0.058)
	0.009 (0.018)	0.017 (0.016)	-0.002 (0.017)	-0.002 (0.017)
	0.042 (0.045)	0.000 (0.037)	0.046 (0.043)	0.025 (0.040)
	0.030 (0.019)	0.032* (0.018)	0.029 (0.018)	0.043** (0.019)
<i>Variance Components</i>				
Individual	1.371	1.289	1.405	1.462
District	0.067	0.069	0.067	0.060
Policy Agreement	0.049 ^a	0.147 ^a	0.047 ^a	0.018 ^a
Number of level - 1 units	31,132	35,020	34,148	35,021
Number of level - 2 units	435	435	435	435
-2 X Log Likelihood	99,352	109,984	109,791	113,688

*p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.

^a Variance component significant at p<.001.

Table 4: Approval of the Incumbent

	Capital Gains Tax	Minimum Wage	Iraq troop withdrawal
Intercept	2.741*** (0.046)	2.803*** (0.051)	2.824*** (0.050)
Safety (γ_{01})	0.002** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)
Scandal (γ_{02})	-0.455*** (0.090)	-0.169 (0.107)	-0.314*** (0.106)
Seniority (γ_{03})	0.003 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.000 (0.002)
Intercept (γ_{10})	0.335*** (0.035)	0.156*** (0.046)	0.353*** (0.042)
Δ Comp (γ_{11})	0.109*** (0.030)	0.133*** (0.033)	0.155*** (0.038)
Seniority (γ_{12})	0.000 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Chal. \$ (log) (γ_{13})	0.012*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.004)	0.008** (0.004)
Don't Know	0.044** (0.021)	0.052* (0.029)	0.046* (0.024)
Same PID	0.761*** (0.021)	0.898*** (0.022)	0.725*** (0.021)
Education	-0.007 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.007)	-0.005 (0.007)
Age	0.001** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Income	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)
Black	0.026 (0.028)	0.013 (0.028)	0.035 (0.029)
Hispanic	0.335*** (0.075)	0.327*** (0.080)	0.224*** (0.073)
Female	-0.027 (0.028)	-0.014 (0.029)	-0.010 (0.030)
Homeowner	0.075 (0.056)	0.029 (0.058)	0.056 (0.030)
	0.051*** (0.017)	0.046*** (0.017)	0.061*** (0.017)
	0.005 (0.036)	-0.020 (0.039)	-0.017 (0.039)
	0.020 (0.017)	0.042** (0.018)	0.032* (0.018)
<i>Variance Components</i>			
Individual	1.280	1.339	1.264
District	0.060	0.086	0.065
Policy Agreement	0.049 ^a	0.090 ^a	0.092 ^a
Number of level - 1 units	34,852	35,243	33,055
Number of level - 2 units	435	435	435
-2 X Log Likelihood	108,827	111,861	103,053

*p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.
Variance component significant at p<.001.

Table 5: Vote for the Incumbent or Incumbent's Party (logit link function)

	Abortion		Stem Cell		Immigration		CAFTA	
Intercept (γ_{00})	-0.470***	(0.159)	-0.137	(0.143)	-0.597***	(0.142)	-0.488***	(0.132)
Safety (γ_{01})	0.022***	(0.004)	0.017***	(0.003)	0.027***	(0.004)	0.025***	(0.004)
Scandal (γ_{02})	-1.260***	(0.261)	-0.880**	(0.382)	1.383***	(0.316)	-1.156***	(0.312)
Open seat (γ_{03})	-0.973***	(0.254)	-0.829***	(0.251)	-1.164***	(0.258)	-0.953***	(0.240)
Seniority (γ_{04})	0.005	(0.006)	-0.005	(0.005)	0.002	(0.006)	-0.000	(0.005)
Intercept (γ_{10})	0.701***	(0.117)	1.202***	(0.128)	0.443***	(0.086)	0.225***	(0.061)
Δ Comp (γ_{11})	0.183**	(0.079)	-0.112	(0.157)	0.170***	(0.065)	0.052	(0.044)
Seniority (γ_{12})	-0.012*	(0.006)	-0.020**	(0.008)	-0.001	(0.004)	0.003	(0.003)
Chal. \$ (log) (γ_{13})	0.015*	(0.008)	-0.002	(0.010)	0.007	(0.007)	-0.002	(0.005)
Intercept (γ_{20})	-0.173***	(0.065)	0.143*	(0.071)	-0.074	(0.066)	-0.024	(0.044)
Same PID	2.769***	(0.064)	2.585***	(0.064)	2.935***	(0.062)	3.008***	(0.058)
Education	0.017	(0.020)	-0.002	(0.019)	0.023	(0.018)	0.008	(0.019)
Age	-0.000	(0.002)	0.001	(0.002)	0.000	(0.001)	0.001	(0.001)
Income	-0.007	(0.009)	-0.007	(0.009)	-0.005	(0.008)	-0.011	(0.008)
Black	0.033	(0.096)	0.086	(0.089)	0.031	(0.089)	-0.003	(0.083)
Hispanic	-0.180**	(0.081)	-0.164*	(0.085)	-0.038	(0.080)	-0.160	(0.071)
Female	-0.033	(0.047)	-0.007	(0.045)	-0.049	(0.042)	-0.053	(0.041)
Homeowner	0.030	(0.061)	0.059	(0.060)	-0.027	(0.055)	0.039	(0.054)
<i>Variance Components</i>								
Intercept	0.732		0.572		0.770		0.620	
Policy Agreement	0.398 ^a		1.109 ^a		0.278 ^a		0.053 ^a	
Number of level - 1 units	20,198		23,547		22,881		23,523	
Number of level - 2 units	435		435		434		435	
-2 X Log Likelihood	58,834		66,414		64,204		66,282	

*p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.
Variance component significant at p<.001.

Table 6: Vote for the Incumbent or Incumbent's Party (logit link function)

	Capital Gains Tax	Minimum Wage	Iraq troop withdrawal
Intercept	-0.201 (0.145)	0.033 (0.151)	-0.092 (0.150)
Safety (γ_{01})	0.024*** (0.004)	0.017*** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.003)
Scandal (γ_{02})	-1.389*** (0.321)	-0.613* (0.344)	-0.895*** (0.229)
Open seat (γ_{03})	-0.969*** (0.226)	-0.752*** (0.225)	-0.769*** (0.213)
Seniority (γ_{04})	0.002 (0.005)	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)
Intercept (γ_{10})	0.856*** (0.098)	0.440*** (0.134)	0.678*** (0.128)
Δ Comp (γ_{11})	0.216*** (0.078)	0.269*** (0.076)	0.310*** (0.098)
Seniority (γ_{12})	-0.000 (0.005)	0.004 (0.006)	0.007 (0.006)
Chal. \$ (log) (γ_{13})	0.025*** (0.008)	0.041*** (0.011)	0.029*** (0.011)
Intercept (γ_{20})	0.026 (0.065)	0.057 (0.0947)	-0.145 (0.070)
Same PID	2.549*** (0.064)	2.795*** (0.063)	2.449*** (0.068)
Education	-0.010 (0.020)	-0.012 (0.020)	0.004 (0.021)
Age	-0.000 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.000 (0.002)
Income	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.016* (0.008)	-0.017** (0.009)
Black	0.071 (0.093)	0.073 (0.084)	0.145 (0.089)
Hispanic	-0.073 (0.081)	-0.103 (0.079)	-0.104 (0.085)
Female	0.042 (0.044)	0.020 (0.043)	0.108** (0.047)
Homeowner	-0.015 (0.058)	0.059 (0.056)	0.037 (0.059)
<i>Variance Components</i>			
Intercept	0.699	0.683	0.511
Policy Agreement	0.313 ^a	0.723 ^a	0.764 ^a
Number of level - 1 units	23,420	23,679	22,186
Number of level - 2 units	435	435	435
-2 X Log Likelihood	66,372	66,982	62,272

*p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001. All hypothesis tests are two-tailed.
Variance component significant at p<.001.

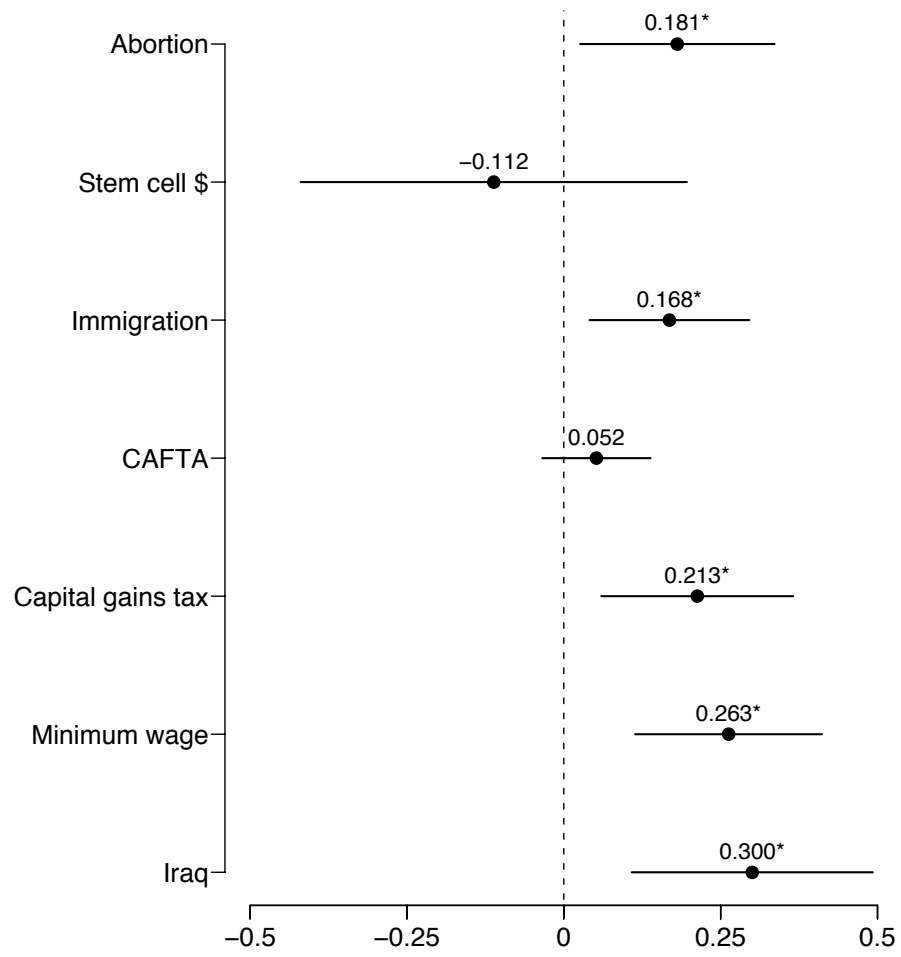


Figure 3: Effect of electoral competitiveness on predicted probability of vote for incumbent

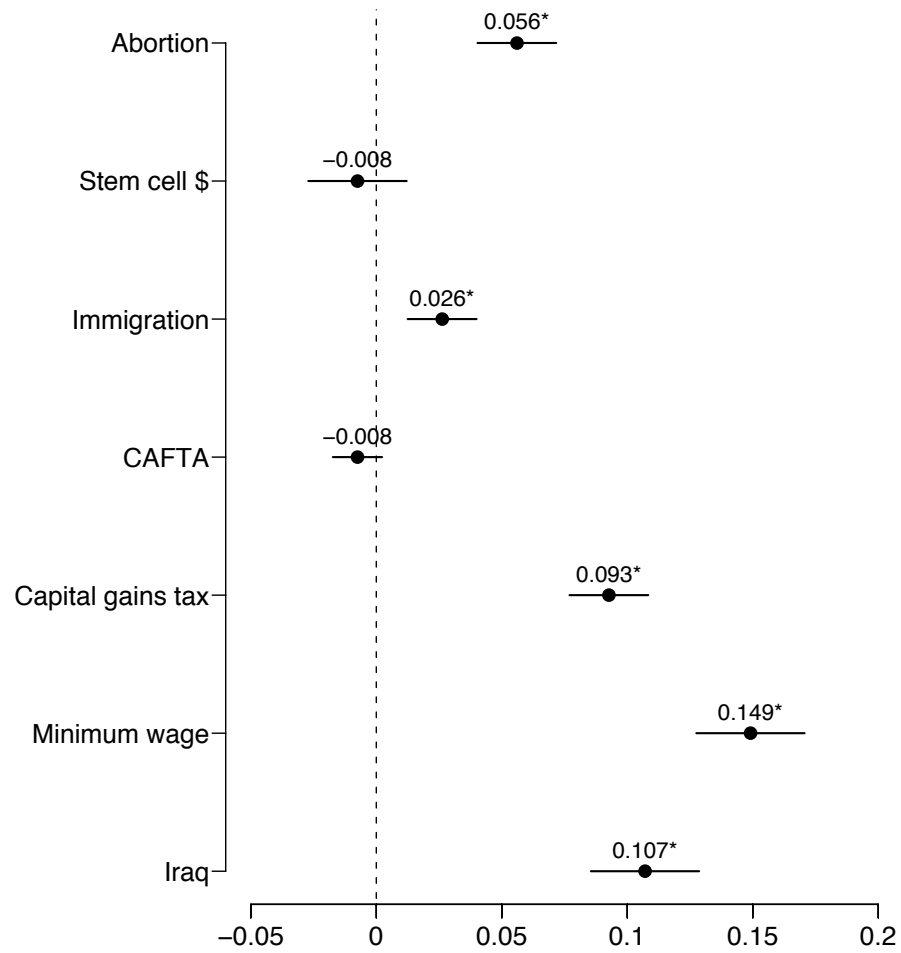


Figure 4: Effect of challenger spending on predicted probability of vote for incumbent

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics

Variable Name	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Agreement - abortion	32026	0.16	0.92	0.00	1.00
Don't know - abortion	36403	0.11	0.32	0.00	1.00
Agreement - stem cell	36032	0.09	0.94	0.00	1.00
Don't know - stem cell	36403	0.10	0.30	0.00	1.00
Agreement - Iraq	34021	0.01	0.96	0.00	1.00
Don't know - Iraq	36403	0.08	0.27	0.00	1.00
Agreement - immigration	35143	0.15	0.94	0.00	1.00
Don't know -immigration	36403	0.09	0.28	0.00	1.00
Agreement - min wage	36261	-0.16	0.96	0.00	1.00
Don't know - min wage	36403	0.05	0.22	0.00	1.00
Agreement - capital gains	35864	0.08	0.93	0.00	1.00
Don't know - capital gains	36403	0.13	0.33	0.00	1.00
Agreement - CAFTA	36033	-0.01	0.88	0.00	1.00
Don't know - CAFTA	36403	0.22	0.42	0.00	1.00
Same PID	36403	0.36	0.48	0.00	1.00
Education	36336	3.31	1.38	1.00	6.00
Age	36403	49.09	15.30	18.00	95.00
Income	35539	8.20	3.16	1.00	14.00
Black	36403	0.10	0.30	0.00	1.00
Hispanic	36403	0.10	0.29	0.00	1.00
Female	36403	0.52	0.50	0.00	1.00
Homeowner	36403	0.73	0.44	0.00	1.00
Approval	36265	3.20	4.41	1.00	5.00
Vote	24388	0.62	0.49	0.00	1.00
MC Female	435	0.15	0.36	0.00	1.00
MC Black	435	0.09	0.29	0.00	1.00
MC Hispanic	435	0.06	0.24	0.00	1.00
Seniority	435	11.69	8.06	0.00	51.00
Scandal	435	0.03	0.17	0.00	1.00
Δ Comp	435	0.11	0.47	-2.00	2.00
Electoral Safety	435	19.51	12.53	0.00	50.00
Open Seat	435	0.08	0.28	0.00	1.00
Challenger spending (million \$, logged)	435	9.12	5.31	0	15.45

Table 8: House Legislation

Issue	Bill Description	Date	House Vote	Bill
Abortion	Ban the procedure that opponents describe as “partial birth” abortion and impose criminal sanctions for those who perform the procedure	6/4/03	282-139 (D: 62-133; 220-5; I: 0-1)	HR 760
Stem cell \$	Override the president’s veto of legislation permitting federal funds for embryonic stem cell research	7/19/06	235-193 (D: 183-14; 51-179; I: 1-0)	HR 810
Capital gains tax	Extend tax cuts on dividends and capital gains initially passed in 2003 through 2009	12/5/05	234-194 (D: 193; R: 225-3; I: 0-1)	HR 4297
Minimum wage	Increase minimum wage	5/18/05	Sponsored by 142 D, 1 R, 1 I	HR 2429
Immigration	Build border fence, force employers to verify legality of workers, tighten border security. Does not include pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants	12/16/05	293-182 (D: 36-164; 203-17; I: 0-1)	HR 4437
CAFTA	Approve the Central American Free Trade Agreement	7/28/05	217-215 (D: 15-187; 202-27; I: 0-1)	HR 3045
Iraq	Oppose setting a date to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq	6/16/06	256-153 (D: 42-149; 214-3; I: 0-1)	HRes 861

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