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Incumbency Surge: Examining the 1996 Margin of Victory for U.S. House Incumbents

Abstract

In 1996, the American public reelected 357 members to the United States House of Representatives; of those running for reelection, 95% succeeded. Several congressmen received a large margin of victory over their political opponents, similar to election results of the past. Trends in American politics have been the overwhelming reelection rates of House incumbents as well as large margins of victory over challengers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors influencing incumbents' margin of victory in the 1996 Congressional elections.

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Victory for U.S. House Incumbents

In 1996, the American public reelected 357 members to the United States House of Representatives; of those running for reelection, 95% succeeded. Several congressmen received a large margin of victory over their political opponents, similar to election results of the past. Trends in American politics have been the overwhelming reelection rates of House incumbents as well as large margins of victory over challengers. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors influencing incumbents' margin of victory in the 1996 Congressional elections.

Literature Review

Most recent research concentrates on the increasing trend at all levels of American government toward high reelection success. Paul Jacob explains that today, challengers have an exceedingly difficult time trying to defeat an incumbent. For example, incumbents who sought reelection in the 1988 general election had a 96% success rate and 98% in 1990. Though the percentage decreased in 1992 because of House scandals, the general election rate for incumbents still remained high at 93% (Jacob, 1994: 30). This is not a new phenomenon as approximately 92% of all incumbent representatives have been reelected since World War II. Even in a year with a lower percentage such as 1992, Davidson and Oleszek emphasize that "turnover [in the House] resulted more from retirements (many involuntary) than from electoral defeats" (Davidson, 1994: 63).

Drawing upon existing literature, Alford and Brady in *Congress Reconsidered* have suggested four main reasons for this reelection phenomenon. The reasons are as follows: (1) congressional district lines drawn to favor incumbents; (2) increase resources of incumbent members; (3) weak congressional challengers; and (4) weak party identification of voters (150 and 151).

The latter three explanations are supported by current research; however, the first theory is not. By examining similar trends in the Senate, which does not use district lines, researchers have concluded that congressional district lines do not favor incumbents and are not an explanation for high incumbency reelection rates (151). However, much research has demonstrated that incumbents are usually rewarded on election days because of numerous factors. These factors include congressional perquisites such as campaign funding, franking privileges, and extensive media coverage. As a result, they often face weaker challengers because of such effective use of these perquisites

(Erikson and Wright, 1993: 99, 101). Finally, American voters do not strongly identify with one party as in the past. More people are declaring themselves independent, and consequently, they are voting for the individual rather than for the party with whom they identify. This practice often results in the reelection of an incumbent (100). I wanted to continue researching explanations for high incumbency reelection rates by examining the 1996 Congressional elections. The dependent variable will be the margin of victory. The independent variables will be demographic and individual characteristics.

Variable Explanations

To examine the factors influencing incumbents' margin of victory, I will look at six independent variables. Margin of victory is measured as the percentage of votes an incumbent receives over his challenger. The independent variables include: years of House service, ideology, political party (individual characteristics), constituency education, average constituency income, and presidential voting measure (demographic characteristics). After using party as an additive variable in the first regression model, party identification acts as an interactive variable in the second and third regression models to better explain how the independent variables impact margin of victory for each party.

Hypotheses

Based upon the previously mentioned independent variables and logical reasoning, the following hypotheses are the expected results of the research. All hypotheses are expected to be supported in the first regression model (party as an independent variable) as well as the second model and third model which used party as an interactive variable.

For the first model, I have hypothesized that Democrats will be more likely than Republicans to receive a higher percentage of votes for two main reasons. First, more American adults tend to affiliate with the Democratic party than the Republican party (Davidson, 1994: 102). Though fewer Democrats vote on average, more fringe voters (i.e., Democrats) vote in a presidential election year which results in more reelected Democrat incumbents. Secondly, the coattail effect is still apparent today: "In presidential years ... the party that wins more than its normal vote for president wins more than its normal vote in the congressional contests" (Erikson and Wright, 1993: 93). Therefore, since President Bill Clinton scored an easy victory over challenger Bob Dole, the Democratic incumbent would receive a greater amount of votes whereas Republicans would be more likely to be rejected because of Dole's poor electoral showing.

Few Americans typically align themselves on one extreme side of the ideological spectrum; few would consider themselves ultra-conservative or

staunch liberal. Therefore, I predict that the candidates who tend to be the most moderate will receive the largest margin of victory.

However, ideology may not be as strong an indicator of margin of victory as other factors. Miller and Stokes, in their famous 1962 study of House elections, concluded that "voters knew next to nothing about the performance of either the parties or individual members of Congress" (Davidson, 1994: 110). Therefore, without knowledge of the congressperson's ideology, the voter will not vote on the basis of conservatism or liberalism.

Next, I postulated that the more years a person serves in the House of Representatives, the greater his margin of victory. Once in office for several years, the incumbent becomes more familiar with the most beneficial utilization of congressional perquisites; therefore, he may gain more name recognition and media exposure, as well as a weaker challenger. Because of these factors, the incumbent will receive more votes from his constituents and consequently, a larger margin of victory.

The fourth hypothesis deals with two district characteristics, education and income. The lower the constituents' level of education, usually, the lower the constituent's income and therefore, the more likely he would be to support the incumbent. Persons with a lower educational and financial standing are usually less informed about government activities and politics, particularly elections. They are less likely than persons with college degrees or those who have more money to know about an opposing challenger because they may not follow current events on or have access to television, radio, or newspaper. Also, upper and middle class, well-educated individuals may have more free time or find it necessary for their employment to stay updated on elections and politics. Therefore, persons with less education and income may be less aware of a challenger with little name recognition and would vote for the incumbent, resulting in a larger margin of victory.

Finally, in the first regression model without separating margin of victory by party, it is expected that presidential vote will have little to no effect on margin of victory. However, it is expected to be a major indicator when party acts as an interactive variable. I hypothesized that the greater a district's vote for Republican George Bush in the 1988 election, the larger the margin of victory for the Republican incumbent in 1996. Similarly, the opposite would be true for Democrats; the more votes Bush received, the lower the margin of victory for Democrats in 1996. Again, this hypothesis will be most relevant for the second and third regression models which use political party as an interactive variable rather than additive variable.

Research Design

Methodology

This study focuses on 351 incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives who ran for reelection and won. This is six less than the total number of incumbents who retained their seats in Congress in the 1996 election. In order to provide the most representative data, I eliminated six outliers from my research. Five cases from Louisiana were eliminated because of the unusual runoff election process in which opponents may be of the same party. Finally, I discarded the lone third party incumbent (Socialist) in the House because I focused only on the two major political parties, Democrat and Republican. All data for each case in this study are examined through multiple regression.

I ran the multiple regression model in two ways using political party affiliation. Because “[p]olitical analysts traditionally have found party identification the single most powerful factor in determining voters’ choices,” I wanted to examine what influence party had on voters’ decisions. Therefore, I first used party as an independent variable, with Democrats coded as zero and Republicans coded as one (Davidson, 1994: 102). Next, by running the regression models separately for Democrats and Republicans, I examined the independent variables to determine which had the biggest impact on party’s margin of victory.

Units of Measurement

In the first model, as noted above, party affiliation is coded with Democrats as zero and Republicans as one. Ideology is the American Conservative Union’s (ACU) rating for U.S. House members, based upon how often a representative supports the position held by the ACU. Income is measured as the median family income within the district, and education is the percent of persons age twenty-five and over who possess a college bachelor’s degree or higher. Finally, presidential voting measure is the percentage of votes George Bush received in the 1988 presidential election. Because of the unusual occurrence in the 1992 presidential election with a major third party candidate, the 1988 election is a more representative example of political culture and district ideology.

Table 1 demonstrates the impact that the independent variables, including political party identification, have on margin of victory. This multiple regression model is significant at the .00001 level according to the significant F test, so these results are highly unlikely to occur by chance. By knowing the independent variables, only 11% of the variance in margin of victory can be explained, meaning other factors not tested may have a great impact on margin of victory.

Table 1
Education, Ideology, Income, 1988 Presidential Vote, Years of Service, and Political Party

	B	Beta	Significant T
Education	.355473	.257514	.0032
Ideology	-.067068	-.245055	.0450
Income	-.438691	-.357934	.0001
'88 Pres Vote	-.021131	-.055145	.3195
Service	.010910	.082889	.1069
Party	1.71440	.075314	.5329
(Constant)	78.448458		
R Square	.11066		
Significant F	.0000		

When controlling for all other independent variables, median family income, a district characteristic, is the most significant value in determining margin of victory. Income also proves to be the strongest determining factor with an absolute beta weight of .357934. The B value of $-.438691$ indicates that for every \$1,000 increase in median family income, the margin of victory decreases by .4 of a percentage point. This marginal decrease supports the original hypothesis that higher median income leads to less support for the incumbent.

Another demographic trait, education, shows different results than income. Statistically significant at the .01 level, education is the second strongest indicator of margin of victory. With a B value of .355473, education is shown to increase margin of victory by three tenths of a percentage point for every one percent of persons possessing a college bachelor's degree or higher. These results contradict the expressed hypothesis because as education increases, margin of victory increases as well. Though I assumed both income and education would produce similar results, only the income value results support the hypothesis.

In contrast to income and education, the last district characteristic, presidential vote, is not significant at the 0.1 level, concurrent with the proposed hypothesis. For each percentage point that George Bush earned in the 1988 election, an incumbent's margin of victory decreases by only .02 of a percentage point in 1996. The strength of this measure is very low as well with a beta weight of .055145.

The most significant individual characteristic variable is ideology, statistically significant at .045. Ideology is a relatively strong indicator of margin of victory (.245055), and the B value indicates that an increase in ideology results in a small decrease in margin of victory. The more conservative an incumbent, according to the American Conservative Union's ratings, the lower his margin of victory. As an ACU score increases by one point, the margin decreases by only .06 of a percentage point. Ideology is found to be a much stronger indicator than I had hypothesized.

According to the data, the number of years of service is also a significant independent variable at the 0.1 level. Data indicates that for each year an incumbent serves in the House, the margin of victory rises as well, but only by a very small percentage (.01). Though the measure is a weak indicator (.082889), these results are consistent with the stated hypothesis.

Political party, unlike other individual variables, is not statistically significant and a weak indicator in determining margin of victory. Because Republican was coded as one, the party B value of 1.7144 indicates that Republicans will be more likely to have a larger margin of victory. This result is inconsistent with my hypothesis as well.

In summary, the findings indicate that, in general, demographic characteristics, particularly income and education, have the most significant impact on margin of victory. Additionally, political party measure and education conflict with the original hypotheses. The expectation that political party would be the most important determining factor of margin of victory is not supported as the absolute strength only measured .082889.

Next, by distinguishing incumbents by the two main political parties, Republican and Democrat, political party was expected to produce different results when controlling for the independent variables. Therefore, I ran a multiple regression model for each party to determine which independent variables had the greatest influence on margin of victory for Republicans and Democrats. Table 2 indicates the results for Democratic incumbents while Table 3 displays the Republican results.

According to the significant F values, the multiple regression model for Democrats is collectively statistically significant at the .00001 level, and the Republicans' regression model is significant at .001. The multiple R square in Table 2 indicates that 48% of the variance can be explained knowing the measured independent variables. This is a much higher percentage of known variance than was indicated in the first regression model. On the other hand, Table 3's multiple R square of approximately 0.11 is extremely low, even lower than the regression model in Table 1, meaning only 11% of the variance can be explained. According to these results, other independent variables may have more of an impact on Republicans' margin of victory than those measured in this study.

Table 2
Democratic Incumbents

	B	Beta	Significant T
Education	-.260927	-.183963	.0694
Ideology	.117506	.185487	.0120
Income	.187256	.136256	.2028
'88 Pres Vote	-.834926	-.802000	.0000
Service	.002736	.028085	.6298
(Constant)	102.437157		
R Square	.47939		
Significant F	.0000		

Table 3
Republican Incumbents

	B	Beta	Significant T
Education	.437441	.340009	.0076
Ideology	.033978	.057054	.4361
Income	-.394030	-.366210	.0044
'88 Pres Vote	.021424	.078352	.2709
Service	.339141	.247078	.0009
(Constant)	62.426568		
R Square	.10872		
Significant F	.0009		

When examining Table 2, the findings indicated that the Democratic margin of victory supported four of five hypotheses. First, the strongest absolute indicator and most statistically significant independent variable affecting Democratic margin of victory is presidential vote reflecting political culture. This is an opposite result of presidential vote impact in the first regression model. For each percentage point George Bush gained, Democrats' margin of victory decreases by eight tenths of a percentage. Therefore, it could be assumed that Democrats are representative of their constituencies.

Next, the second most significant variable in determining margin of victory for Democrats is ideology, a relatively strong indicator with a beta weight of .185487. The higher the ACU score, the greater the margin of victory for Democrats. This indicates that the more moderate a Democratic

incumbent, the larger his margin of victory over a challenger, supporting the original hypothesis.

Constituency income is not significant for Democrats. As income increases, margin of victory for Democrats increases, unlike the other first regression model. This disproves the hypothesis that lower income constituents tend to support Democratic candidates; however, this is not a statistically significant result.

For Democrats, education is also statistically significant. The education beta weight for Democrats is .183963 and when controlling for all other independent variables, the hypothesis is supported. As more people gain higher levels of education (as the education variable increases by 1%), the margin of victory for a Democrat decreases by approximately three tenths of a percent.

Finally, the last variable analyzed is the most insignificant for Democrats. Service is statistically insignificant with a T score of .6298. Though insignificant, service has a positive impact on margin of victory as hypothesized. With each year of service in the House, the margin of victory increases by .002 percent for Democrats.

When compared to the first and second regression model findings, Republican results, as shown in Table 3, indicate some similarities to the previous models. The Republican margin of victory seems to support the expected results in all cases except two. However, like the Democrats, several of these results were found not to be statistically significant.

The strongest indicator of Republican margin of victory, in contrast to the Democratic results, is service. Service is significant at the .001 level for Republicans with a beta weight of .247078. Like the Democrats, service has a positive impact on margin of victory. With each year of service in the House, the margin of victory increases by .34 percent, supporting the hypothesis.

A demographic independent variable, constituency income, follows a similar trend, statistically significant for the Republican margin of victory and insignificant for Democratic margin of victory. The influence of income on Republican margin of victory supports the hypothesis because margin decreases by approximately four tenths of a percentage point for each \$1,000 increase in income.

Along with income, another constituency variable, education, is statistically significant for Republican margin of victory, but it does not support the hypotheses. The beta weight for Republicans is a strong coefficient of .340009. As education increases by one percentage point, the margin of victory also increases by 4 tenths of a percent. Perhaps because persons with higher educations generally support Republicans, the margin of victory for Republicans rises as constituents become more educated.

The last two independent variables, presidential vote and ideology, are not statistically significant indicators of Republican margin of victory. Though insignificant, for each percentage point George Bush gained in the 1988 election, Republicans increase their margin by two hundredths of a percentage. For ideology, the research indicated that as a Republican had a higher ACU rating or the more conservative a Republican, the greater the margin of victory. These findings discount the hypothesis.

When using party as an interactive control rather than additive variable, demographic characteristics once again tend to be the most significant variables. For Republicans, income and education are statistically significant while presidential vote and education are significant for Democrats. Democratic margin of victory appears to be greatly influenced by political culture, measured by presidential vote. However, income tends to be the strongest indicator for Republicans.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by these results, the four main reasons for incumbency set forth by Alford and Brady are not the only factors influencing margin of victory and incumbency. Rather, margin of victory is a culmination of many factors ranging from constituency income and education to a representative's years of service. In the first regression model, the independent variables are collectively statistically significant, with income as the most significant factor and strongest indicator of margin of victory. When using party as an interactive variable in the second model, income is also the strongest indicator of margin of victory for Republicans, and in the third model, presidential vote is a very strong indicator for Democrats.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that there are a number of factors which influence an incumbent's margin of victory. This study may be continued by examining other independent variables such as region, PAC money, campaign expenditures, and gender, and also by comparing the 1996 election results with 1994 election results to see the change over time. These independent variables may help to explain more of the variance of the dependent variable, margin of victory.

Appendix

Data for this research were obtained from several sources, including newspaper reports and almanacs. *Roll Call*, a Washington D.C. based newspaper, provided the election results. Two demographic factors, education and income, were obtained from *Congressional Districts in the 1990s* published by Congressional Quarterly. The presidential voting measure was found in Congressional Quarterly's *Politics in America 1996*, and the ACU scores were taken from American Conservative Union rating scorecard.

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