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Congressional Perquisites and Incumbent Safety

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There has been a fundamental change in the character of congressional elections in the past twenty years. The number of congressional elections won by greater than 55 percent of the vote has increased greatly.¹ One explanation for the increased number of safe seats has stressed effective incumbent use of staff, free trips to the district and other advantages of their office. This research will test the hypothesis that U.S. House incumbents have been able to create safe seats by using the perquisites of a congressional office.

Literature

Fiorina vividly describes the creation of a safe congressional district. He examines two traditionally marginal districts of which one became safe in 1964.² The behavior of legislators in these two districts is revealing; the legislator from the district that remained marginal devoted much time to policy affairs in Washington while the member in the safe district concentrated on constituent affairs. The safe legislator established a personal presence in the district by moving among gatherings during frequent trips home. He used the advantages of the office, Washington and district staff, and maintained three field offices. Fiorina concludes that the safe district resulted from the deemphasis of controversial policy positions and the "... emphasis of nonpartisan, nonprogrammatic constituency service."³ Other research supports Fiorina's conclusions. Born, for example, also believes that the rise in incumbent safety has resulted from freshmen elected since 1966 obtaining greater electoral rewards from their first term. Born suggests that new members "... induced voting shifts in their favor by effectively capitalizing on the opportunities of incumbencies."⁴

The lessons of Fiorina's tale have not been overlooked by congressmen. Newer and more marginal members especially are using the opportunities provided by a congressional office to enhance constituency service and contact. Cover⁵ notes that more narrowly elected members take full advantage of the franking privilege and have a higher monthly mailing rate than other members. All members, especially the most recently elected, have been aided by increased free trips home and are returning to the district more frequently.⁶ In spite of this evidence, there is little research that links the use of the opportunities of a congressional office to increased vote for incumbents.

One source of data that has been used to research such a link is the SRC national election studies. Since 1978 these studies have identified methods by which voters have been contacted by congressional candidates. Using these data Mann and Wolfinger find that the use of constituent-service ac-

tivities has resulted in the incumbent being better known in the district and also being confronted by relatively less well-known challengers.⁷ Abramowitz finds that contacts with constituents have produced favorable evaluations of the incumbent which may be of electoral benefit.⁸ Jacobson suggests that incumbents benefit from various activities including advertising and credit claiming, and that these advantages accrue prior to the reelection campaign.⁹

These studies are enlightening but their conclusions must be considered with caution. Legitimate questions may be raised concerning the causal direction of the relationship between contacts and candidate evaluation. Dexter, for example, notes that legislators are more likely to be contacted by constituents that agree with them.¹⁰ The SRC findings may be less a product of contacts enhancing candidate evaluation and more a result of those favoring the legislator not being passive recipients but instead actively seeking such contacts. Also, the small N of the SRC studies may produce uncertain findings. The 1978 SRC survey sampled only about ten respondents in a district and not all of these had contact with the incumbent. Clearly, another approach would be valuable in providing both a unique perspective of the relationship between the use of a congressional office and vote and perhaps to bolster the SRC findings.

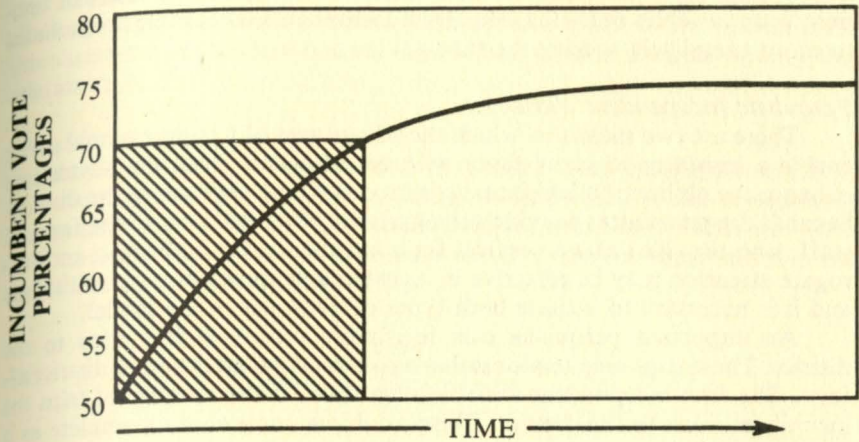
Unfortunately, there have been few attempts to specify a direct link between use of a congressional office and vote for incumbents. Brown, Fuchs, and Hoadley's analysis of a subset of House Democrats from the class of 1974 discovered that variables such as staffing, trips to the district and phone calls were unrelated to reelection success.¹¹ The only substantial predictor of incumbent vote was campaign spending. Johannes and McAdams found that casework, as determined by staff estimates of the number of cases and projects processed in a legislator's office, had no statistically significant impact upon vote for incumbents in the 1978 congressional elections.¹² Born did not find an impact of staffing on vote for House incumbents.¹³

One explanation for the failure of these studies to find a relationship between perquisite use and incumbent vote is that they studied both marginal and non-marginal districts. It is plausible that the impact of perquisite use on vote for incumbents would be most effective in marginal districts. While perquisites may be responsible for transforming a marginal into a safe district, there is no reason to believe that this relationship is continuous in producing even safer districts. As shown in Figure 1, it is in the marginal districts (shaded area) that perquisite use may affect vote and it is here that efforts to measure this relationship should be directed.

There are several possible reasons that perquisite use will not increase vote percent once a district has become safe. The first reason relates to the electoral nature of a district. There are likely to be limits beyond which a legislator's share of the vote cannot be increased no matter what the level of perquisite use. There are always some voters, for example strong identifiers of the challenger's party, who would not vote for the incumbent under any conditions. Alford and Hibbing provide support for this by demonstrating that, after an initial rapid growth, incumbent vote tends to stabilize at about 67 percent.¹⁴

The changing goals of congressmen may affect the relationship between perquisite use and incumbent vote. As members become safe they are

Figure 1



likely to continue using the advantages of their offices, but the focus of this use will shift from primarily electoral to other goals. Hibbing notes that congressmen tire of constant campaigning while neglecting their families.¹⁵ Safe legislators are therefore likely to enjoy their security and use trips home and days in the district for family rather than political reasons. Fenno notes that the district political activities members do engage in will be devoted to protecting the existing electoral base rather than expansion.¹⁶ During this 'protectionist' stage of their career "... House members become less interested in building supportive constituencies and most concerned about keeping electoral support already attained."¹⁷ Also, electorally secure members may become more involved with their policy interests and reassign staff from political to legislative duties. Fenno found that safe legislators tend to pursue other goals such as policy or influence in the House.¹⁸ Safe legislators continue to use the advantages of their office but this use may be directed toward different goals and may confound the relationship between perquisites and incumbent vote.

Research Design

To measure the impact of perquisite use on incumbent vote we examined a large number of cases over several elections in the most marginal districts in Congress. The districts studied were selected by analyzing vote returns in House districts for the five elections from 1960 through 1968. To be selected, a district's average Democratic vote for the five elections could vary only between 40 and 60 percent with no district in any one year fluctuating outside of the 35 to 65 percent range.¹⁹ Using this rule we were able to select 86 districts which were the most marginal in Congress from 1960 through 1968.²⁰ Having determined the districts with a historical record of marginality we then analyzed the relationship between constituency-service variables on incumbent vote in elections from 1972 through 1978.²¹ If there is a relationship between constituency service and vote for incumbent, it should be visible in these previously marginal districts.

The dependent variable is incumbents' share of the two-party vote.

There are two categories of independent variables. The first measures the ability of perquisites to affect vote. The second category consists of non-perquisite variables that may also affect incumbents vote; these are included to more completely specify the model.

Perquisite Independent Variables

There are two means by which the advantages of a congressional office enable a legislator to curry favor with constituents. First, the advantages enhance the ability of a legislator to personally pay attention to the district. Second, the perquisites provide surrogates for the legislator, in the form of staff, who provide various services for constituents. Both personal and surrogate attention may be effective in increasing support among constituents and it is necessary to include both types of variables in the model.

An important perquisite that legislators receive is free trips to the district. These trips help the incumbent give personal attention to district affairs. The first independent variable, therefore, is the number of trips the incumbent takes to the district. This variable is somewhat incomplete as it does not indicate how long the incumbent remained in the district. The longer the legislator is in the district the more time that is available for building support with constituents. Length of stay, therefore, may be important in explaining incumbent vote and was included as an independent variable.

The number of trips and days were relatively easy to compute when round-trip vouchers were filed with the Clerk of the House.²² When one-way vouchers were filed we credited the incumbent with one trip and one day spent in the district since no assumption about the length of the visit could be made. Those members who received a yearly lump-sum reimbursement for their trips were excluded from the analysis since it was impossible to determine either the number of days or trips.²³

The second group of perquisites that may affect vote are staff. Through casework, staff are in contact with thousands of constituents and have the potential for a substantial impact on vote. The measures of this perquisite are the number of (1) Washington staff (2) district staff (3) district offices.²⁴ Each of these measures, in different ways, may affect constituents' vote decisions. Washington staff resolve constituent problems with the federal bureaucracy. District staff interact with constituents and serve as a link with Washington. District offices are a symbol of the members' presence in the district and provide access to staff.²⁵ Each legislator will emphasize different elements of these three staff measures. It is necessary, therefore, to include all three measures in the model.

Non-Perquisite Independent Variables

The second category of independent variables more fully specifies the model of incumbent vote. The first variable in this category is expected district vote. Most incumbents quickly establish a base of support consisting of those voters committed to the candidate.²⁶ The use of perquisites is not intended to fully explain all of the incumbents' vote but only that increment above the base. For each election the base was calculated as the incumbent party's average vote for the previous five elections.

The strength of the challenger is an important factor that affects vote for the incumbent. There exists a strong negative relationship between the

level of challenger spending and incumbent vote.²⁷ Given this relationship, the measure of challenger strength will be challenger spending. Since challenger spending has a constantly diminishing effect on incumbent vote, this variable was used in a natural logarithmic form to properly specify this relationship.

Analysis

At the outset, it is important to note that use of the district service is becoming increasingly popular in Congress. In Table 1 it can be seen that the members of our 86 districts have increased the use of the activities from 1968 to 1976. These congressmen must feel that there is some utility in the use of the advantages of their office.

TABLE 1
Increase of Congressional Entrepreneurial Activities
—Mean Levels of Activities by Year For
Districts (N = 86)—

	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976
Number of Trips To District	12.4	21.9	34.8	36.8	46.2
Days Spent in District	80.0	128.9	183.0	192.0	166.7
Number of Staff In Washington Office	6.2	6.6	7.0	7.9	8.7
Number of Staff In District Office	2.2	2.6	2.8	3.9	5.1
Number of District Offices	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.9	2.1

Ordinary least-squares was used to estimate the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable.²⁸ While challenger spending did affect vote, there is no consistent relationship between the district-service variables and vote for the incumbent. Born and Alford and Hibbing suggest that the major increase in support for incumbents occurs during the first several reelections.^{29,30} With this in mind we reestimated the model using only the first and second reelection contests. This model also failed to exhibit a relationship. We must conclude that, at least in this study, that district attention does not have an independent effect on incumbent vote.

TABLE 2
OLS Estimates of Constituency Model
Dependent Variable—Incumbent/Vote/Percent

	1972	1974	1976	1978
Intercept	652.955* (168.914)	599.702* (121.994)	687.310* (82.879)	477.618* (99.541)
District Average	-.0627 (.0264)	.1209 (.1663)	-.2271 (.1338)	.1487 (.1594)
Challenger Spending (Thousands of Dollars)	-1.622* (.4174)	-1.360* (.2507)	-1.027* (.1563)	-3.986* (.1197)
Trips Home	-2.144 (2.818)	.9527 (1.428)	1.124 (.7798)	1.497 (1.117)
Days in District	-.1107 (.2989)	-.5932* (.2117)	-.2092 (.1419)	-.0289 (.2062)
District Staff	12.14 (11.89)	2.679 (9.890)	2.827 (5.052)	-2.501 (5.871)
District Offices	24.31 (23.36)	12.85 (16.39)	-3.054 (10.12)	-3.188 (11.69)
Washington Staff	4.042 (9.654)	8.700 (6.437)	15.09* (4.408)	7.340 (5.369)
R ²	.27	.49	.48	.36
F Value	3.66*	7.78*	7.64*	4.97*

*p .05
Standard Errors in Parenthesis

Conclusion

As did Johannes and McAdams we find no direct empirical evidence of any relationship between constituent service and House incumbents' electoral success even in districts with a history of marginality.³¹ We are reasonably certain that this finding is not an artifact of distorted data. It is logical to expect the *Clerk* data to be fairly accurate. Since these data are generated from expense vouchers submitted by legislators for reimbursement, few would fail to apply for expenses incurred as part of their job. Even if random error existed, we could not expect this to totally negate a relationship between constituent service and vote. Moreover, the staffing data are highly accurate and also failed to demonstrate a relationship between district attentiveness and vote.³²

While we find no meaningful effects, the possibility of a long-term payoff from constituency service remains. Perhaps more detailed models of the relationship between constituency service and incumbent vote need to be developed and tested. Fiorina supports this position and argues that the service-vote relationship is complex and non-recursive.³³ In their "Reply" to Fiorina's comments, however, McAdams and Johannes indicated that they ". . . made every reasonable effort to test for interactions and alternative functional forms" and still did not find a relationship between attention and vote.³⁴ We tested more complex models with additional controls and lagged variables and did not detect an impact of attention on vote.³⁵

Further research should not only investigate simultaneous effects but should also be sensitive to alternative explanations. For example, constituents may expect a certain level of attentiveness.³⁶ Incumbents may be susceptible to a blackmail effect, as increased district attentiveness raises constituency expectations. Attentiveness above some undetermined level may not increase incumbent electoral margins, but incumbents may be punished electorally for dropping below district expectations over an extended period of time. Thus incumbents who create a home style based on district attentiveness may find their constituents expect it to continue and are displeased if it does not. However, researchers may need to design more sensitive measures of incumbent safety. District attentiveness, casework, and incumbent contacts may only affect a small, yet important, percentage of the vote. Perhaps if we knew how much of the congressional vote could be attributed to local forces the direct effects of these variables would become apparent. This research has not addressed these questions but, we hope, future research will.

FOOTNOTES

¹David Mayhew, "Congressional Elections: the Case of the Vanishing Marginals," *Polity* 6(1974), pp. 295-317.

²Morris P. Fiorina, *Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴Richard Born, "Generational Replacement and the Growth of Incumbent Reelection Margins in the U.S. House," *American Political Science Review* 73(1979), pp. 811-817.

⁵Albert D. Cover, "Contacting Congressional Constituents: Some Patterns of Perquisite Use," *American Journal of Political Science* 24(1980), pp. 125-135.

⁶Glenn R. Parker, "Sources of Change in Congressional District Attentiveness," *American Journal of Political Science* 24(1980), pp. 115-124.

⁷Thomas E. Mann and Raymond E. Wolfinger, "Candidates and Parties in Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 74(1980), pp. 617-632.

⁸Alan I. Abramowitz, "A Comparison of Voting for U.S. Senator and Representative in 1978," *American Political Science Review* 74(1980), pp. 633-640.

⁹Gary C. Jacobson, "Incumbent's Advantages in the 1978 U.S. Congressional Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 6(1981), pp. 183-200.

¹⁰Lewis, A. Dexter, "The Representative and His District." *Human Organization* 16(1957), pp. 2-13.

¹¹Stephen Brown, Beth Fuchs and John Hoadley, "Congressional Perquisites and Vanishing Marginals: The Class of 1974," Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Meeting, Washington, D.C., September, 1979.

¹²John Johannes and John McAdams, "The Congressional Incumbency Effect: Is It Casework, Policy Compatibility, or Something Else: An Examination of the 1978 Elections," *American Journal of Political Science* 25(1981), pp. 512-542.

¹³Richard Born, "Perquisite Employment in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1960-1976," *American Politics Quarterly* 10(1982), pp. 347-362.

¹⁴John R. Alford and John R. Hibbing, "Increased Incumbency Advantage in the House," *Journal of Politics* 43(1981), pp. 1042-1061.

¹⁵John R. Hibbing, "Voluntary Retirement from the U.S. House: The Costs of Congressional Service," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 7(1982), pp. 57-74.

¹⁶Richard F. Fenno, *Home Style*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹This is consistent with Mayhew's definition of marginal districts. See Mayhew, pp. 304-305.

²⁰The districts we studied, based on the 1970 redistricting, are as follows: Conn., 2, 3, 4, 6; Maine, 1, 2; N.H., 1; N.J., 1, 2, 3, 9; N.Y., 4, 23, 25, 26, 28, 38; Pa., 4, 5, 8, 19, 24; Ill., 2, 11, 18, 19, 22, 24; Ind., 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11; Mich., 2, 11; Ohio, 9, 14, 16, 17; Wisc., 1, 2, 9; Iowa, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6; Kan. 3, 5; Minn., 5, 6, 7; Mo., 4, 6, 7, 9; Neb., 3; N.D., 1; S.D., 2; Ky., 4; Md., 5; Okla., 2, 6; W. Va., 2, 4; Col., 2, 3; Idaho, 1; Mont., 1; N. Mex., 1, 2; Utah, 2; Cal., 21; Ore., 4; Wash., 5; Va., 9, 10; N.C., 4, 5, 6, 8; Tex., 5.

²¹These districts were "followed" throughout the analysis even when there was a change in incumbent or party. When redistricting occurred we continued our analysis of the existing incumbent in the new district. Redistricting does not have the effect of making a district either more competitive or secure. See Charles S. Bullock, III, "Redistricting and Congressional Stability, 1962-1972," *Journal of Politics* 37, (1975), pp. 569-575, and John Ferejohn, "on the Decline of Competition on Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 71(1982) p. 168.

Because of concern that the selection criteria might limit variance, we examined the distribution of the vote percent during the 1970's—the period of our analysis. The following table indicates that there is sufficient variance for reliable estimates.

Mean Percentage Democratic	1960-1968 (Number of Districts)	1972-1978 (Number of Districts)
26-30	—	3
31-35	—	2
36-40	—	11
41-45	23	16
46-50	27	11
51-55	19	14
56-60	17	10
61-65	—	7
66-70	—	8
71-75	—	1
76-80	—	3

²²Data for the days and trips variables was gathered from the *Report of the Clerk of the House*, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970-1978.

²³Parker credited congressmen with a week in the district if they were present two or more days. We feel that our method of coding the actual number of days is more accurate. Parker also excluded from the analysis members who took lump-sum allowances. See Parker (1980).

²⁴Data for the staffing variables were gathered from Charles Brownson, *Congressional Staff Directory*, Mt. Vernon. Vol. 1970-78.

²⁵Born, (1982), p. 349.

²⁶Fenno, (1978), p. 10.

²⁷Gary Jacobson, "The Effects of Campaign Spending in Congressional Elections," *American Political Science Review* 72(1978), pp. 469-491.

²⁸It is plausible that 'number of trips home' and 'days in the district' are highly colinear and would therefore inflate the standard errors. Examination of these variables revealed that this was *not* the case. There were no multicollinearity problems.

²⁹Born, (1979).

³⁰Alford and Hibbing.

³¹Johannes and McAdams.

³²Charles Brownson.

³³Morris P. Fiorina, "Some Problems in Studying the Effects of Resource Allocation in Congressional Elections," *American Journal of Political Science*, 25(1981), pp. 543-567.

³⁴John C. McAdams and John R. Johannes, "Does Casework Matter? A Reply to Professor Fiorina," *American Journal of Political Science* 25(1981), p. 589.

³⁵Other models were tested such as lagged-district attentiveness to determine if previous elections affected subsequent use of perquisites, the effects of contested primaries, distance from Washington, incumbency, type of district election, turnout percentage, and other relevant variables. None of the results from these analyses were either interesting or predictive and therefore not reported.

³⁶Eric M. Uslaner, "The Case of the Vanishing Liberal Senators: The House Did It," *British Journal of Political Science*, 11(1981), p. 112.