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Sounding the Alarm: Down-Ballot Setback for the Democrats in 2020

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 general election turned out more American voters than any other election, its monumental stakes commanding the attention of the world. While the focus in the race's aftermath has primarily been the top of the ticket, the rebuke of President Trump's time in office, the equally important down-ballot races have been largely passed over. Many major political analysts like the Cook Political Report predicted that Democrats would expand their House majority by 5-10 seats. Yet, the Democratic Party ended up losing 10 seats[1]. During the certification of election results, I collected data on incumbents in the US House of Representatives in their re-election bids. The paper examines performance of 2020 incumbents relative to 2018, and the factors which caused change in vote share. Findings suggest that the GOP had an even more successful down-ballot campaign than reported and highlights the absence of certain systemic factors once assumed to weigh heavily on incumbency advantage.

INTRODUCTION

Incumbency has long served to be not only one of the largest advantages in politics, but also a main reason for continuous and growing discontent in our politicians. Yet, despite years of complaining of Congress' inability to accomplish anything worthwhile, Americans again and again go to the ballot boxes and elect the same representatives and senators. Without term-limits, the bicameral legislature of the United States is built on experience, and depending on geographic location, an election win can guarantee you a lifetime of public service in Washington. Take Rep. Don Young (R-AK) who is the longest serving member of the House of Representatives, winning a special election of the seat of Rep. Dan Begich, who tragically died in a plane crash in 1973. Young started his 25th term in 2021, the longest serving member in the history of the Republican party. Yet Don Young is able to serve so long because Alaska has a long history of voting Republican, Alaskans not voting for a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Yet geography has never been the chief factor in deciding the fate of an incumbent representative and their ability to hold their post for a long period of time; demographics have long factored into not only the ability of one to get elected, but the strength of their incumbency advantage. Despite comprising of over 50% of the population, women, in a record-setting year held just 103 out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives, a scant 23% of the legislative body. The Senate is hardly more representative with only 26 of its 100 members being female in its 116th legislative session, also a record. Around the world, just 18% of politicians are women[2]. But do the difficulties of being elected persist for women after they have already won a seat? In other words, is the incumbency advantage as strong for women as it is for men? At first glance, out of 15 seats lost by the Democrats in the House of Representatives in 2020, a disproportionate number of them (6) were lost by women. Furthermore, depending on the election cycle, the party of the candidate plays a key role in the strength of their incumbency advantage. In years where the sitting president is a Republican, Democrats often gain a boost in the upper chambers (Senate and the House) and vice-versa. For instance, the Democrats gained a whopping 41 seats in their bid to re-take the House of Representatives in 2018, seen as a response to President Trump's policy. No matter the cycle, a candidate's party is a strong indicator of their electoral showing at the polls.

METHOD

I. Data Collection

To collect the data for the data set, I visited the secretary of state's websites in all 50 states to extract total votes cast and vote share of the incumbents running for re-election in 2020. I compounded these data with data of the same variables compiled by the Federal Election Committee (FEC) from the 2018 elections leading to the seating of the 116th House of Representatives. However, the data in the dataset excluded a few current representatives per their election via special election. Special elections take place at a separate time from the general or midterm elections in November with the purpose of filling a vacant seat. Vacancies were not considered in the dataset as their high-profile nature funnels in millions of dollars more in donations than if it were during the normal cycle. Vacan-

1 Wasserman, Dave. **House Republicans Defy the Polls, Narrow the Demorats' Majority.** Cook Political Report. November 4, 2020. https://cookpolitical.com/analysis/house/house-overview/house-republicans-defy-polls-narrow-democrats-majority

2 Shair-Rosenfeld, Sarah and Hinjosa, Magda. **Does Female Incumbency Reduce Gender Bias in Elections? Evidence from Chile.** Political Research Quarterly. 2014. University of Utah Press

cies occur for many reasons such as the death of a member of Congress such as the late Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) or an appointment to a cabinet position as seen in the case of former White House Chief of Staff, Rep. Mark Meadows (R-NC).

II. Variables and Methodological Choices

In collecting the data from the 435 incumbent members of the House of Representatives, due to the nature of the individual races and the freshness of the data, I had to make choices about which data to include in the final data set, and those to exclude. Below, I will be doing an in-depth explanation of the main variables in the data set.

Change in Vote Share: The dependent variable in this dataset is extracted from examining the change in vote share from 2018 to 2020. In measuring the strength of incumbency advantage, it is not sufficient to merely look at which candidates retained their seats and which ones lost them. In a normal cycle, 20-25 seats will change hands out of 435 making the data very insufficient. Thus, in order to accurately quantify the incumbency advantage in 2020, I looked at the incumbent's vote share as a relative statistic, relative to past performance in 2018. Looking at the dependent variable as relative to past performance, though, is pertinent. A Democratic candidate gaining 52% of the vote in a very Democratic California district is nowhere near comparable to a Democrat gaining 52% of the vote in ruby red Oklahoma. Of course, however, the composition of the races may change drastically from cycle to cycle. Val Demings (D-FL), a 2-term congresswoman from Orlando, was not even challenged by a major party candidate in 2018, gaining 100% of the vote. Fast forwarding two years, Val Demings only received 63.60% of the vote, challenged in the general election by a Republican. Comparing these two elections' vote shares is not an accurate representation of incumbency advantage. For any candidate who ran unopposed in either 2018 or 2020, I did not calculate the change in their vote share. Furthermore, I did not calculate the vote share of any candidate whose opponent was drastically different from one year to the next. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) ran against a Republican in 2018[3] winning 86.8% of the vote in her very Democratic district. Republicans, knowing the race would be lost, did not challenge Pelosi in 2020, opening the way for a Democratic opponent who, as a much more viable alternative to the 17-term congresswoman, cut Pelosi's vote share to 77.6%. Due to the discrepancy in the composition of these two elections, Pelosi's, and others in her situation over two election cycles. Finally, I also was not able to include data from representatives who were not seeking re-election or had died. In calculating this statistic, I used **two-party vote share**, getting rid of the third-party candidates (unless they had a significant presence in the race) to more accurately compare data from the two cycles. The data was collected from December 14-17 of 2020 from Secretaries of State, and the exclusion criteria was considered qualitatively, not through automation. When in doubt, the data was excluded from the dataset as to not skew the data. Election data from New York will pour in until June of 2020, likely, but the votes are unlikely to drastically change vote share.

3 California's electoral system sends the top two performing candidates from the primary (held in the spring) no matter the party preference of the candidates. Thus, in some districts, especially the very partisan solid blue districts near Los Angeles, candidates from the same party will face off in the general election.

Candidate Gender: The independent variable is of interest to see its effects on the vote share from one election cycle to the other. In this study, 0 represented Male representatives and 1 represented Female representatives.

Challenger Gender: This variable seeks to answer the question whether the gender of the candidate challenging the incumbent has a significant impact on how their change in vote share. In this study, 0 represented Male challengers and 1 represented Female challengers.

Race Competitiveness: Per Cook Political Report's rankings on house races published on November 2, 2020, 73 races were categorized as "Likely", "Lean" or "Toss-up". I combined all these races into a single categorization- "Competitive". These ratings indicate that there is at least a chance of these 73 seats being competitive and changing hands. In theory, the vote share of an incumbent may actually increase if their race is rated as being more competitive as the national party leadership (DNC, RNC) will pour more money into the race in hopes of winning. In the study, 0 represented Safe seats and 1 represented Competitive seats in the 2020 cycle.

Terms Served: This variable is included to investigate whether being a member of congress for a longer period of time produces continuous and compounding incumbency benefits. In the dataset, half-terms produced from a special election are counted as a full term as in theory, the special election should grant the representative all the effects of normal incumbency advantages: name recognition from being on the ballot in the past, work experience (no matter how long), and media coverage as an incumbent. While the variable is continuous, as will be explained later, I grouped the terms together into three levels under the rationale that after a set number of terms, it is almost impossible for an incumbent to be unseated.

DATA ANALYTICS STRATEGY

Before fitting a model for the data, I proceeded to plot distributions of the variables of my data set, checking for normalcy and making changes to the variables accordingly. In examining the distribution of terms served in congress, I decided to create a variable of **Binned Terms** which grouped together all those who had served 1 term at the time of the 2020 election (1), those who had served 2-5 terms (2) and those who had served more than 5 terms (3).

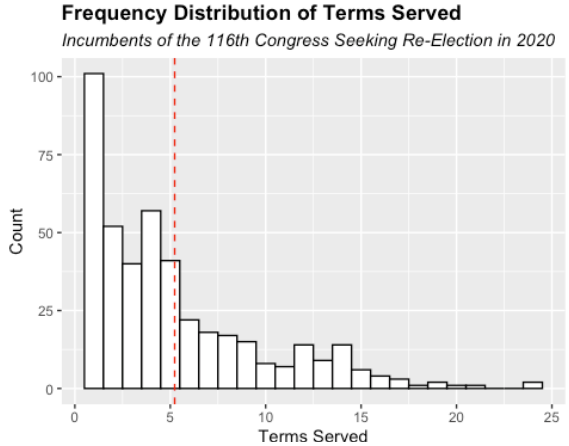

Figure 1. *Frequency Distribution (Terms Served). Source: US Library of Congress*

After plotting the distributions of my independent and dependent variables (see **Appendix A**), I moved towards fitting two models. First, I fit a model of my main affects using my principle independent variables to predict the change in vote share (see **Table 1**). After doing so I moved to calculating the two-way ANOVA between select pairs of my independent variables (see **Appendix B**) to check for the significance of their interactions. I used two-way ANOVA after checking the conditions to run the ANOVA test. Finally, I fit a model using both the main affects and the interactions of independent variables. The interaction model, as will be explained later, hardly made a difference in predicting the dependent variable.

RESULTS

Both the main effect model and the interaction model's R-squared values' indicated their ability to predict the change in vote share from 2018 to 2020 about 50% of the time using only five variables (and their interactions). While the interaction model was slightly more encompassing than the main effects model, the difference is quite negligible between the two.

The means shown in **Table 2** were calculated using the sample size (N=344) and subsequently split by group depending on the independent variable. One such variable where the mean is drastically different is the party of the candidate. The party and challenger gender variables are statistically significant to the highest degree and the terms variable's p-value falls below the $\alpha = 0.05$ threshold making it also statistically significant.

The frequency distribution is quite shocking and is the first indication of the disastrous 2020 down-ballot results for the Democratic party. The mean change in vote share between the parties is extremely distant, with the Republicans gaining on net and the Democrats losing vote share on average. The histogram of Democratic incumbents is quite normal, yet centered around -2%, an almost even distribution of vote share. While the distribution is relatively normal, they see a large boost near 0, a sign that many districts voted Republicans in at the same rate they had in the past election cycle.

At first glance, the gender distribution (see **Figure 3**) looks equally discrepant, almost as much as the party distribution, and yet the p-value is not even close to being statistically significant (0.709). Not only do female incumbents perform much worse than their male counterparts no matter which gender is challenging them, but they seem to lose more when being challenged by a male than a female challenger, pointing towards institutional sexism in electoral politics. Even though women heavily outraise men due to strong campaign donation sites such as Emily's List, when parties "act as gatekeepers, endorsing and supporting candidates", female candidates are undermined and in turn underrepresented at both a local and federal level[4]. Men perform marginally better against a female challenger than a male challenger. However, in the discussion, I will touch on why this may be slightly misleading.

DISCUSSION

In examining the model, the main contributor is clear: party. And as far as this election cycle was concerned, being part of the Democratic party did not do you any good. With an effect size of 0.427 (**Table 2**), a candidate's party affiliation was largely responsible for the change in vote share that would occur from 2018 to 2020. However, the significance of party changes bears both good news and bad news for the Democratic party moving forward. As shown in

4 Sanbonmatsu, K. (2010). *Where Women Run Gender and Party in the American States.* University of Michigan Press.

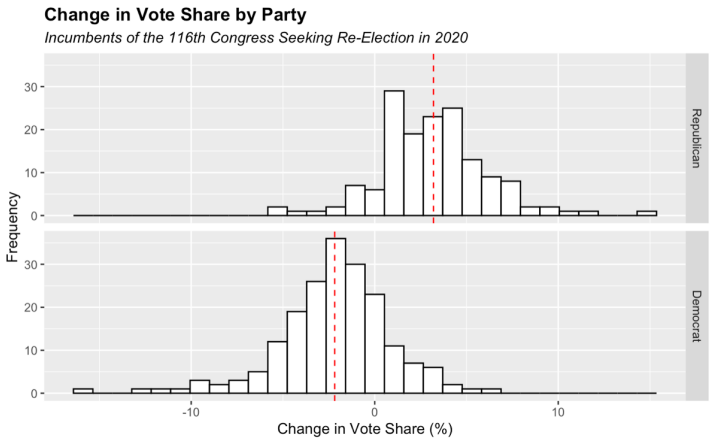

Figure 2. *Change in Vote Share by Party Affiliation*

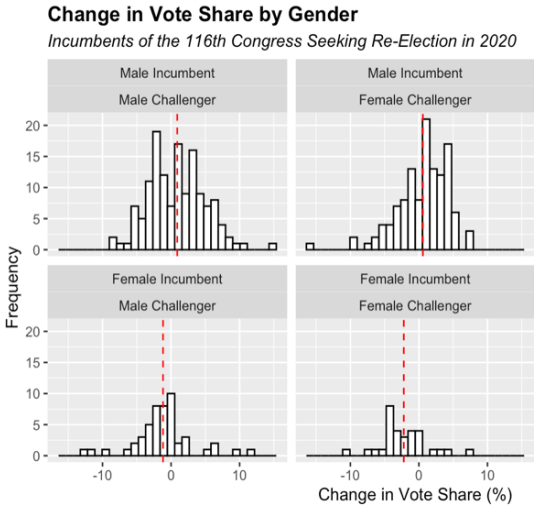

Figure 3. *Change in Vote Share by Challenger and Candidate Gender*

	Main Effects Model	Interaction Model
R-Squared	0.4704	0.4819
Adj. R-Squared	0.4625	0.4679
AIC	1731.649	1732.084
BIC	1758.513	1774.299

Table 1. *R-Squared, Adjusted R-Squared, AIC and BIC values for the main effects and interaction models.*

	Mean(%)	F-stat	df	p-value (>F)	Effect Size
Candidate Gender	**M:** 0.750 **F:** -1.565	0.1394	1	0.709	0.0004
Party	**R:** 3.181 **D:** -2.181	251.445	1	<0.001***	0.427
Challenger Gender	**M:** 0.355 **F:** 0.017	16.520	1	<0.001***	0.046
Binned Terms	**1:** 0.088 **2-5:** 0.880 **5+:** -0.632	5.234	2	0.023*	0.015
Race Competitiveness	**Safe:** 0.298 **Comp:** -0.140	1.892	1	0.170	0.005

Table 2. *ANOVA Table (Variables in the Main Effects Model) Candidate Gender, Party, Race Competitiveness, Binned Terms, Challenger Gender*
*Significance codes: 0 '***' 0.001'**' 0.01'*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1*

Figure 2, the average Democrat took a heavy hit relative to their 2018 numbers, however, it should've been expected had this been a normal year. While the presence incumbent Republican President, a largely unpopular one at that, should lead to Democrat victories in down-ballot races, it is important to put the race in context. Turnout in the election was sky high, through the roof… for the presidency. House races on the other hand, not so much. Furthermore, it is important to take into account that Republicans have the unique advantage of defending much safer seats. On average, Republicans are defending R+13 seats ($\bar{x}$ = 13.19) vs. the Democrats who on average defend D+11 seats ($\bar{x}$ = 11.08). The standard deviation tells an even greater story as one standard deviation in Republican-held seats is 6.54 points compared to 11.83 points for Democrat-held seats. Thus, whether it be because of the tendency towards the status quo, a deeply polarized electorate, or the absence of a qualified challenger due to safer seats that are almost guaranteed wins, hardly any Republicans lost ground in this election from their 2018 numbers (**Figure 2**). Ultimately, no matter how safe the district was for the Democrats, they lost ground, shown by the large effect size of the party independent variable in the change in vote share, an all-around rebuke of the Democratic party. G.K. Butterfield (D-NC) experienced the biggest overall drop, losing 15.47% from his 2018 total of 69.85%. The second biggest drop was the outspoken Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), perhaps the most well-known representative in the House and the face of the young Democratic-Socialist wing of the party, losing 12.79% from her 2018 totals. Yet, the good news for the Democratic party is that the effects of the model are not permanent nor perfect. While the model encapsulates almost half of the values using just five main effect variables (0.4704) from 2018-2020, it does not take into account previous elections and will certainly not work until 2024. Districts are being re-drawn after this election cycle meaning that the variable for change in vote share will not be accurate until two election cycles with the new districts have passed (2024).

Much of previous literature on historic incumbency advantage has supported the notion that men are much more likely to have a stronger incumbency advantage than women. In a study of 6-year and 12-year incumbency periods, Gary Moncrief and Joel Thompson find that while the cohort of women have a higher 12-year retention (50.0%) than do men (27.8%), the retention is almost negligible considering the discrepancy of women and men in the legislative branch.[5] At least in the findings of my data, I would say that the discrepancy is significant. While the average man performed 0.74% better (see **Table 2**) than he did in 2018, the average woman performed 1.56% worse! However, while significant and enough to change an election, it is hard to determine that this is because the candidates are women. The effect size of candidate gender was essentially 0 (0.004) on the model and the association between a candidate's gender and party contributed to under 1% of the model (0.006).

I would liken the discrepancy in means, yet the lack of statistical significance, to two factors. First, representation of women is so low in congress that there is a lack of data to pull from. In future investigations, I would love to pull from contribution data and PAC donations to determine whether women receive less money and less attention from the leadership. This lack of data effects the results just as the Moncrief and Thompson findings from 1993. While the findings themselves are significant, the sample size is not large enough. Until there are more women, it is hard to determine whether incumbency disadvantage is due to gender simply from vote share data: reversely causal but true. Secondly though, the party affiliation of women in the house of representatives is crucial. The large majority of women in the house are Democrats meaning that we cannot definitively determine whether the loss of vote share was based on gender or party allegiance. Herbert Weisberg of Ohio State University writes, "The incumbency effect would be expected to be greatest for pure independents, who are not affected by partisan ties to either major party."[6] That being said, first-term female congresswomen Donna Shalala (D-FL), Debbie Muscarel-Powell (D-FL) and Kendra Horn (D-OK), who lost their first bids for re-election by 1.4, 1.6 and 2.04 points respectively, would likely look to a mix in increased partisanship and gender for their loss-

5 Thompson, J.A., Moncrief, G.F., 1993. **The implications of term limits for women and minorities: some evidence from the states.** Social Science Quarterly 74 (2), 300–309.

6 Weisberg, H.F, 2002. **Partisanship and Incumbency in Presidential Elections.** Political Behavior (Special Issue: Parties and Partisanship Part 3) 24 (4), 339–360.

	F-Statistic	df	p-value (>F)	Effect Size
Candidate Gender: Party	2.198	1	0.1391	0.006
Candidate Gender: Challenger Gender	0.486	1	0.4862	0.001
Race Competitiveness: Challenger Gender	3.033	1	0.083 .	0.009
Race Competitiveness: Party	4.296	1	0.039*	0.013

Table 3. *Associations of Variables*

es. However, since Weisberg's analysis, analysis of DW-Nominate scores has confirmed that congressional partisanship has increased exponentially over the last sixty years (Andris, Lee, Hamilton, Martino, Gunning, Selden 2015). However, while Weisberg finds that pure independency leads to a stronger incumbency advantage, Americans are electing more and more partisan candidates with high DW-Nominate scores leading to even less cooperation and the near elimination of re-election based on bipartisanship and moderatism.[7] Thus, it is clear to see why party affiliation had the largest effect size in the model (0.427) as the American political system moves towards pure partisanship.

Two variables which I expected to yield more conclusive results were the challenger gender and race competitiveness variables. While the gender of the challenger predicted 4.6% of the model, its finding that incumbents do better on average against men is a bit misleading considering that the majority of nominated challengers, and challengers who win primaries, are men, a continuation of the fact that gender bias exists both in the chambers and at the local level in party nomination and in primaries. Furthermore, race competitiveness was pretty much a non-factor as was the number of terms that someone has served. Race competition is an interesting case, as competitive swing seats will likely yield stronger challengers from the challenging opposition in order to flip it, or at least as a money guzzling technique. Yet, in the grand scheme of things, there is no strong correlation between how competitive the seat is and the effect on vote share. When examining election by election, it is likely to see that turnout may have skyrocketed and lead the incumbent to a much larger win than the year before. However, on the flip side, the same may is surely to occur for an incumbent running in a safe seat, stretching their margin without a viable challenger. Race competitiveness is clearly important in donations, turnout, overall attention paid by the party establishment and an interesting case study in the partisanship of candidates, but it doesn't have any sizable effect on vote share.

In a future experiment, I plan to run a regression using the terms served as a continuous variable rather than a binned one (**Figure 4**-see **Appendix A**). The problem with running a regression though, is that the distribution (**Figure 1**) looks like Poisson's model, not even close to normal.

CONCLUSION

While on the surface, Democrats may focus on Joe Biden's 7 million vote win over President Trump, they have much to worry about after a nationwide rebuke of their party's effectiveness in Congress. While not irreversible, Democrats need to be prepared for the fight of their lives to keep the House in 2022 after redistricting.

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APPENDIX A

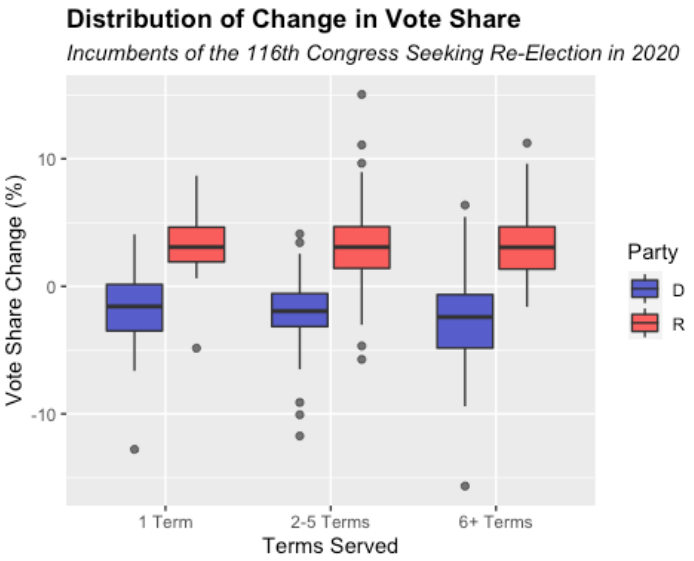

Figure 4. *Impact of Number of Terms on Change in Vote Share (Binned)*

7 Clio Andris et al., 2015, **The Rise of Partisanship and Super-Cooperators in the U.S. House of Representatives,** *PLOS ONE* 10 (4)