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Is There an Ideological Asymmetry in the Incumbency Effect? Evidence from U.S. Congressional Elections

Daide Morisi, John T. Jost, Costas Panagopoulos, and Jussi Valtonen

Revised manuscript

Abstract

The electoral advantage that incumbent legislators enjoy over challengers in the U.S. Congress has been investigated extensively in political science. Very few studies, however, have considered the role of individual differences when it comes to incumbency preferences among voters. Based on theory and research in political psychology, we hypothesized that political conservatives would exhibit stronger preferences than liberals for incumbents over challengers from the same party. Extensive analyses based on more than 150,000 voters from seven election cycles in the U.S. from 2006 to 2018 supports this hypothesis. A significant effect of conservatism on incumbency preferences was observed in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and it was not attributable to Republican Party identification. This ideological asymmetry is consistent with system justification theory and prior research linking conservatism to risk aversion and status quo bias. Practical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Incumbency advantage, status quo bias, political conservatism, system justification

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Data and replication: All data sets are publicly available from the CCES website: <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>. The code to reproduce all analyses described in the main text and appendices will be made publicly available on the lead author's Harvard Dataverse webpage.

Incumbency Advantage in Congress

The incumbency advantage is one of the most extensively studied phenomena in the scholarly literature on the U.S. Congress (Carson & Roberts, 2011). Since the 1970s, political scientists have observed that incumbent legislators are re-elected at extraordinarily high rates relative to challengers (Cover, 1977; Erikson, 1971; Ferejohn, 1977; Jacobson, 2009; Mayhew, 1974). According to Hinckley (1980, p. 441), “simply knowing that there is an incumbent in the contest supplies a major predictor of the vote” in Congressional elections. In post-War U.S. House elections, more than 90 percent of officeholders have sought reelection, and more than 90 percent of them have succeeded (Jacobson, 2009). While disagreement persists regarding the sources of the incumbency advantage and the best methods for investigating it, the phenomenon itself is not really in doubt (Carson & Roberts, 2011; Gelman & King, 1990; Johannes & McAdams, 1981; Stonecash, 2008).¹

Traditional approaches have focused on structural factors contributing to the advantage, including the role of campaign fundraising (Abramowitz, 1989, 1991; Erikson & Palfrey, 1998; Jacobson, 1978, 2009; Moon, 2006); the effects of redistricting (Cox & Katz, 2002; Friedman & Holden, 2009); favorable economic conditions (Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001); the use of Congressional mail by officeholders to enhance their saliency and reputation (Cover & Brumberg, 1982); the role of media coverage (Prior, 2006); and over-time changes in party loyalty in the electorate (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2002; Jacobson, 2015; Weisberg, 2002). Other studies have highlighted individual-level factors related to political candidates, such as strategic decisions about campaign entry and exit (Jacobson, 1989; Jacobson & Kernell, 1981); ideological positioning and legislative activism (Johannes & McAdams, 1981); service to constituencies (Fiorina, 1977; Serra, 1994); factors affecting the quality of challengers (Hinckley, 1980; Bond, Covington, & Fleisher,

¹ A clever experiment by Brown (2014) suggested that people are not strongly influenced by incumbency status when it comes to making judgments about hypothetical candidates. However, there are important psychological factors, such as comfort with familiarity, that may only operate in the context of real-world elections. For at least some voters, we suspect that these factors could increase support for incumbents over challengers.

1985; Krasno & Green, 1988; Cox & Katz, 1996); and candidate familiarity (Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stuart, 2000).

In contrast to the massive literature examining institutional factors and the actions of political elites, very few studies have investigated the role of personal or psychological factors on the part of voters when it comes to understanding incumbency effects. However, there are good reasons to believe that cognitive-motivational processes—such as anchoring on the status quo—contribute to the incumbency advantage (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988; Bisbee & Honig, 2021). In this regard, it is important to point out that incumbency bias is neither a recent phenomenon nor a uniquely American one. Even in the 19th century, voters disproportionately favored incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives—at a time when officeholders possessed limited access to resources (Carson, Engstrom, & Roberts, 2007). Incumbency effects have been observed in many different countries (Freier, 2015; Hainmueller & Kern, 2008; Redmond & Regan, 2015; Salas, 2016), indicating that the phenomenon cannot be explained by features that are unique to the U.S. All of this suggests that a more general account that draws, at least in part, on human psychology is needed.

In the present study, we explore the possibility that meaningful individual differences exist when it comes to incumbency bias, defined as the systematic tendency to prefer incumbents over challengers in elections. According to system justification theory, people are motivated—to varying degrees, depending upon personal and contextual factors—to defend and justify the status quo, including aspects of the political system and its institutions and arrangements (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Simply because they represent the status quo, incumbent candidates should benefit from system justification motivation. If so, incumbents would be especially appealing to politically conservative (vs. liberal or progressive) voters, insofar as conservatism is associated with less openness to new experiences (Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak, 2010), stronger preferences to maintain the status quo (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), and higher

system justification scores in general (Jost, 2020).

To our knowledge, no previous research has investigated ideological asymmetries in incumbency effects or approached the topic from the perspective of system justification theory. We view this as a significant omission, insofar as there are meaningful individual differences in the tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk and that such differences covary with political orientation (Jost, 2017). Much as liberals and conservatives differ when it comes to trusting the government when it is in the hands of the “opposition” (Morisi, Jost, & Singh, 2019), there may well be an ideological asymmetry when it comes to trusting (or supporting) incumbents vs. challengers. Thus, we explored the novel possibility that conservatives would be more likely than liberals to favor the “safer,” more familiar status quo candidate, all other things being equal.

Drawing on a large pool of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES), we analyzed data from seven U.S. Congressional elections that took place between 2006 and 2018. Our work complements longstanding research programs in political science on the incumbency advantage by calling attention to additional—and heretofore neglected—psychological factors, such as individual differences in political conservatism and underlying epistemic and existential motives to reduce uncertainty and risk.

Motivated Preferences to Maintain the Status Quo

Psychological studies reveal that biases in human information-processing affect voting decisions, and that some biases help to explain why voters are inclined to favor incumbents over challengers. First, evidence from social and cognitive psychology demonstrates that when people are presented with alternatives of approximately equal value, they often choose options that reflect the status quo (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) or are simply labeled as such (Moshinsky & Bar-Hillel, 2010). Thus, “status quo bias” is very likely to affect voting decisions (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). Because incumbents are treated as standards or reference points against which challengers are compared—and because

people are risk averse in general—most electoral situations provide incumbents with a distinct psychological advantage (Dahlbäck, 1990).

The psychology of voting behavior is considerably more complex than this, however, because some individuals are more likely than others to manifest a preference for maintaining the current state of affairs. Although people may be risk averse in general when it comes to political candidates (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988), some individuals are more risk averse than others (Eisenberg, Baron, & Seligman, 1998). For instance, Eckles, Kam, Maestas, and Schaffner (2014) investigated the psychological tolerance for risk and its relation to vote choice. They observed that risk-averse individuals were more likely to support incumbents, whereas risk-tolerant individuals were more likely to support challengers. Thus, Eckles and colleagues (2014, p. 746) proposed that the incumbency bias is partly driven by a psychological aversion to risk and uncertainty. Other studies likewise demonstrated that risk-averse individuals were more likely than risk-takers to support incumbents in the 2008 U.S. House elections (Kam & Simas, 2012), the incumbent party in Mexico (Morgenstern & Zechmeister, 2001) and the status quo in sovereignty referenda held in the U.K. (Morisi, 2018).

Importantly, research in psychology links individual differences in risk-aversion to political conservatism (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Morris, Carranza, & Fox, 2008). That is, people who identify themselves as more politically conservative tend to score higher on domain-general measures of intolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity as well as sensitivity to potential threats and dangers in the environment (Jost, 2017). These findings are consistent with the tenets of system justification theory, which suggests that (a) epistemic and existential needs to reduce uncertainty and threat to attain a sense of order, structure and safety are associated with a motivated preference to maintain the status quo (i.e., system justification), and (b) a motivated preference to maintain the status quo is more likely to be associated with a preference for politically conservative (vs. liberal or progressive) ideological outcomes (Jost, 2020). Indeed, several studies

demonstrate that conservatives tend to exhibit more aversion to ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk, in comparison with liberals (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost, 2017, 2020).

With respect to the incumbency advantage, then, we hypothesized that *ceteris paribus* conservative voters would exhibit stronger preferences for electoral incumbents than liberal voters would. This hypothesis is consistent with Eckles et al.'s (2014) findings that (a) conservatives were less tolerant of risk than liberals, and (b) people who were less tolerant of risk were more likely to favor incumbents over challengers. It is also consistent with recent work showing that right-wing voters were less likely than left-wing voters to support a constitutional reform when it was framed as changing the status quo (Morisi, Colombo, & De Angelis, 2019).²

Ideological Strength and the Incumbency Effect

Since early studies on the “structure” of political attitudes and beliefs (Converse, 2006), the liberal-conservative dimension has been conceived of as a unidimensional continuum with different degrees of ideological strength. If we focus on strength of ideology, rather than the dichotomous categories of liberals or conservatives, a further consequence of system justification theory would be that the motivation to defend existing social, economic and political arrangements should be more prominent among those who strongly endorse a conservative ideology compared to those who only loosely identify as conservatives. In this sense, we would expect support for incumbents (versus challengers) from the same party to increase in tandem with the strengthening of conservative ideology.

However, this prediction conflicts with the motivation to support in-group candidates. In line with research on strength of partisanship (Bartels, 2000), we would expect people with strong

² A similar group-level difference should also emerge when comparisons are made between Republican and Democratic voters. Although ideology and partisanship are obviously distinguishable, the correlation between the two has increased in recent decades (Lelkes, 2016). Thus, to the extent that most Republicans are conservative and most Democrats are liberal, we would hypothesize that (on average) Republicans should exhibit stronger preferences for incumbents over challengers compared to Democrats.

ideological positions to overwhelmingly vote for in-party candidates—that is, liberals supporting Democrats and conservatives supporting Republicans—regardless of the incumbency status of the candidates. In other words, voters who are extremely committed to their party or ideology are unlikely to vote for out-party candidates even when they are incumbents. It follows that the incumbency bias should be more pronounced for voters whose ideological commitments are weaker overall. This expectation is in line with prior research showing that the incumbency advantage in Congressional elections is less pronounced among loyal partisans (Ansolabehere et al., 2000; Jacobson, 2015; Weisberg, 2002).

It is important to point out that these conflicting hypotheses do not preclude the possibility of an ideological asymmetry with respect to incumbency effects. Even if the incumbency effect declines as ideological strength increases, we would anticipate a difference between liberals and conservatives at each corresponding level of ideological strength. That is, if party loyalty is the primary driver of vote choice, and the motivation to defend the status quo is secondary, it follows that (a) the incumbency effect should be stronger among those with weak (vs. strong) ideological commitments, and, at the same time, (b) at each level of ideological strength, conservatives should be more likely than liberals to vote for incumbents of the same party. That is, the incumbency effect should be larger among those who identify slightly as conservative compared to those who identify slightly as liberals, and so on as strength of ideology increases.

Method

We pooled and analyzed data collected during seven national election cycles from 2006 to 2018 from the Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES).³ Internet surveys were administered by YouGov using matched random-sampling to identify weighted samples that were representative of the U.S. adult population. Respondents who completed pre-election waves were re-interviewed in post-election surveys. As recommended by the principal investigators, we used

³ All datasets are available on the CCES website at <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

post-election survey weights in all analyses (Ansolabehere & Schaffner, 2017).

To investigate our hypothesis that conservatives would be more likely than liberals to exhibit a preference for incumbents in Congressional elections, we conducted a series of logistic regressions of vote choice and inspected interactions between respondents' ideology and party membership of the incumbent in each Congressional district in every election cycle. The dependent variable was dichotomous, indicating whether the respondent voted for the Republican or Democratic candidate (excluding non-voters and those who voted for other candidates), as recalled in post-election surveys. We excluded open seats, uncontested races, and seats in which one of the two major candidates was an Independent.

The key independent variable was the respondent's ideology as measured in pre-election surveys. In the surveys from 2010 to 2018 we recoded the categories "Very liberal," "Liberal," and "Somewhat liberal" as "Liberal," and the categories "Very conservative," "Conservative," and "Somewhat conservative" as "Conservative."⁴ In 2006 and 2008, ideology was measured on a 100-point scale from very liberal (0) to very conservative (100), with the value of 50 labelled as "the most centrist American." We recoded the values from 0 to 49 as "Liberal", and the values from 51 to 100 as "Conservative." To investigate the role of ideological strength, we retained the original, full-scale variable for the surveys from 2010 to 2018 and recoded the 100-point scale in the 2006 and 2008 surveys into six categories.⁵

To precisely quantify the incumbency effect, we recoded the dependent variable so that it took the value of 1 if the respondents voted for the more ideologically congenial candidate (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican), and a value of 0 if they voted for the other candidate. We also recoded the incumbency variable so that it took a value of 1 if the

⁴ We excluded "Moderates," because we did not have specific hypotheses for these voters.

⁵ We recoded the values as follows: 0 to 10 as "very liberal", 11 to 39 "liberal", 40 to 49 "slightly liberal", 51 to 60 "slightly conservative", 61 to 89 "conservative", and 90 to 100 as "very conservative".

incumbent's party matched the respondent's ideology, and a value of 0 if not. This approach allowed us to determine the extent to which (1) respondents were more likely to vote for ideologically congenial candidates when they were incumbents vs. challengers (a symmetrical incumbency effect); and (2) the incumbency effect was stronger among conservative vs. liberal voters (an asymmetrical incumbency effect). In this way, we were able to set aside obvious effects of partisan loyalty to focus on incumbency effects while holding candidate partisanship constant.⁶ (Because we excluded open seat races and restricted the analyses to votes for Democratic vs. Republican candidates, we would have obtained identical results if we had estimated incumbency effects based on voting for out-party candidates).

In the regression models we adjusted for other demographic factors assumed to influence incumbency effects and voting behavior, such as the gender, age, race, education level, and religious denomination of the respondent (McGregor et al., 2017; Sheffer, 2019). We included fixed effects for years and Congressional districts (House) or states (Senate) to adjust for unobserved heterogeneity between districts/states and between election years. In addition, we adjusted for retrospective evaluations of the economy, because such evaluations are known to be strong predictors of support for incumbents in presidential elections (Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001).⁷ In Appendix B we replicated the models by replacing respondent ideology with partisanship (Democratic vs. Republican identification).

Results

Incumbency Effects as a Function of Political Ideology

Figure 1 summarizes the results of two logistic regressions in which vote choice was predicted by

⁶ Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of liberals reported voting for Democrats and the overwhelming majority of conservatives reported voting for Republicans, regardless of incumbency status. Therefore, we compared incumbency effects in voting for candidates from the same party.

⁷ Because adjustment variables can sometimes artificially inflate effect sizes (Lenz & Sahn, 2020), in the appendices we report the results of analyses without adjustment variables. The findings were substantially similar to those reported in the main text.

Incumbency Advantage in Congress

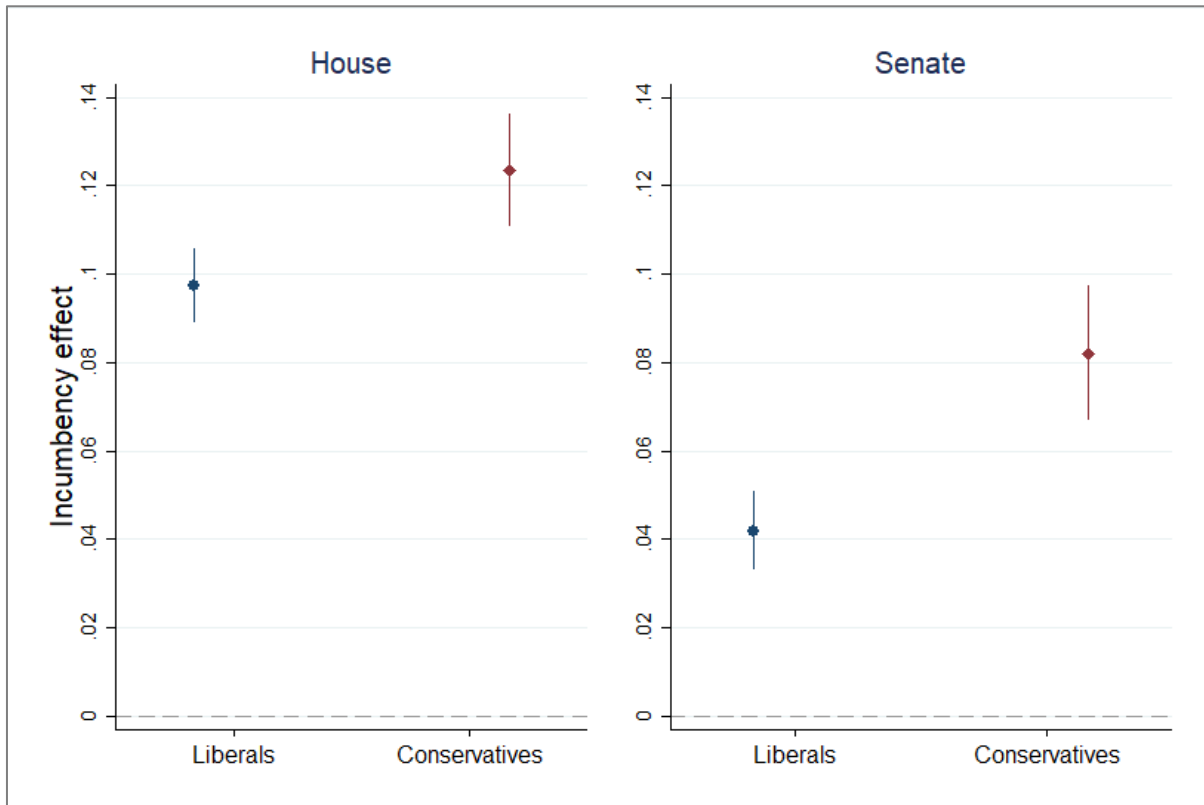
the interaction between the respondent's ideology and the incumbency status of the candidate. The plot illustrates differences in the predicted probability of voting for an incumbent versus a challenger (value of 0 on the Y-axis) from the same party as a function of respondent ideology. We estimated separate models for the House of Representatives and Senate.

Two conclusions follow. First, the results confirmed the existence of a general incumbency effect: in House races and (to a lesser extent) in the Senate, incumbent candidates obtained a larger share of votes than same-party challengers.⁸ Second, the magnitude of the effect differed significantly according to the ideological orientation of the voter. In House races, liberals were 10 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents (vs. challengers) from the same party, whereas conservatives were 12 percentage points more likely to do so. Although this may seem like a small effect, a difference of 2 percentage points is large enough to be quite consequential, especially in competitive races, which are often decided by a smaller margin than that.

Figure 1. Incumbency effects by respondent ideology in U.S. Congressional elections (2006-2018, pooled)

⁸ Presumably, the incumbency effect is larger in the House vs. Senate because Representatives have a shorter mandate than Senators, so the electoral stakes are lower and the candidates are less well-known in general.

Incumbency Advantage in Congress



Note: Differences shown are in the predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates are based on two separate logistic regression models (using weighted data) for House (Model 2 in Table A2) and Senate elections (Model 2 in Table A4), adjusting for respondents' gender, year of birth, education, race, religious denomination, and retrospective economic evaluations, with fixed effects for year and district (House) and state (Senate). Vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

In Senate races, liberals were approximately 4 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents over challengers from the same party. At 8 percentage points, the incumbency advantage was twice as large for conservatives. In both types of races, the difference between liberals and conservatives was statistically significant and did not change substantially when we considered only registered voters (see Table A6). All of the findings thus far suggest the existence of an ideological asymmetry with respect to incumbency bias, in line with theory and research in political psychology.

Incumbency Effects as a Function of Ideological Strength

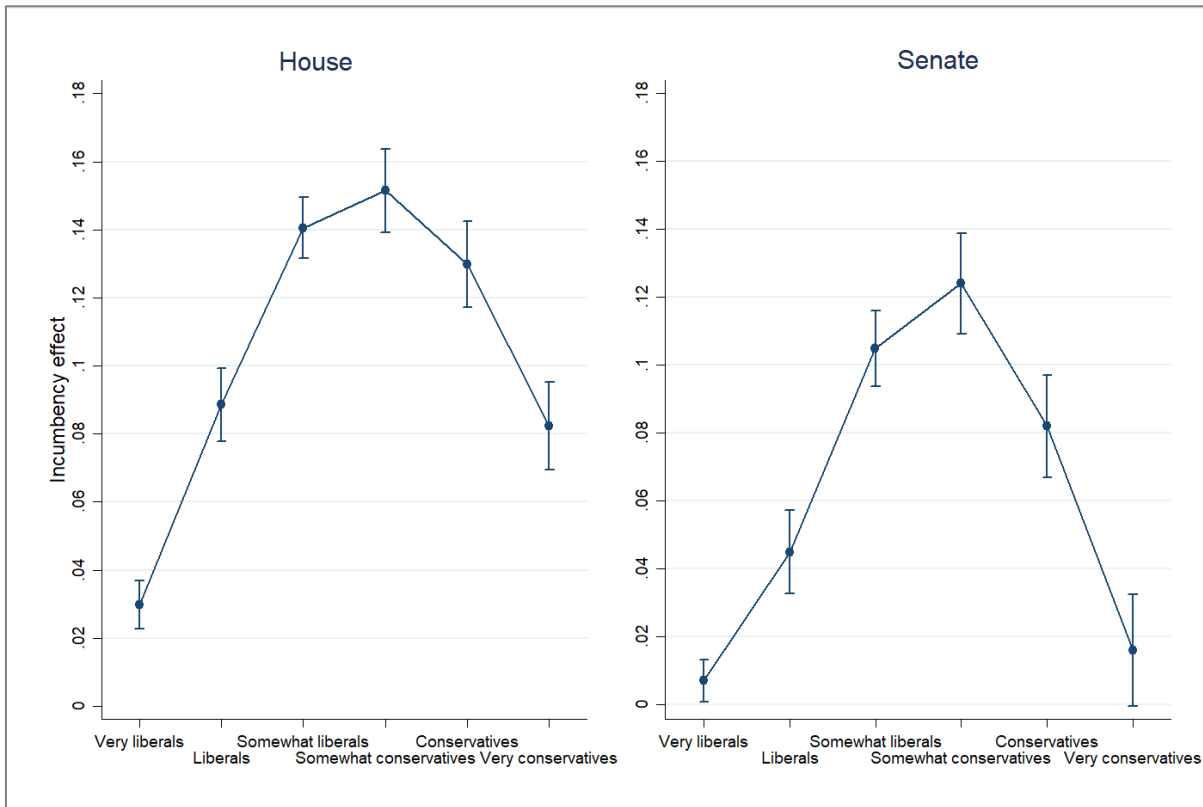
Next we investigated whether the ideological asymmetry appeared at varying levels of ideological strength (or extremity). Because we did not expect the magnitude of the incumbency effect to increase in a linear (monotonic) fashion as voters “moved” from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative,” we entered a quadratic term in regression models to take into account the likelihood that the incumbency effect would be weaker among voters with stronger political loyalties, as suggested by previous research.

Consistent with this expectation, we observed that in both House and Senate races, the incumbency bias was more pronounced among respondents who were less ideologically extreme, as shown in Figure 2. At the same time, there are clearly patterns of ideological asymmetry, especially in House races. In these races, self-identified “conservatives” were 13 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents over challengers from the same party, as compared with 9 percentage points for self-identified “liberals.” Respondents who identified themselves as “very conservative” were 8 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents over challengers, as compared with 3 percentage points for respondents who identified themselves as “very liberal.”

The pattern was more symmetrical in the Senate, although we again see a clear difference between liberals and conservatives. For the largest groups of respondents—those who identified themselves simply as “liberals” or “conservatives”—conservatives were 8 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents over challengers from the same party, as compared with 4 percentage points among liberals. In various alternative model specifications, we obtained substantially similar results, consistent with the hypothesized pattern of ideological asymmetry (e.g., see Figure A1 in Appendix A).

Figure 2. Incumbency effects by strength of ideology in Congressional elections (2006-2018)

Incumbency Advantage in Congress



Note: Differences shown are in the predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates are based on the same models used to generate Figure 1, interacting political ideology as a continuous variable (to investigate linear and quadratic effects) with the incumbency status of the candidates.

Incumbency Effects as a Function of Party Identification

Although our theoretical framework is based on psychological research focused on liberal-conservative ideological asymmetries, a fairly obvious question is whether the same differences would arise when comparisons are made on the basis of political partisanship rather than ideology. Therefore, in Appendix B we summarize the results of regression models in which we replaced ideology with a variable based on whether the respondent identified as Democratic or Republican (see Tables B1-B4). The findings confirm the existence of general incumbency effects in both U.S. House and Senate elections. In House races, Democratic and Republican respondents exhibited a comparable tendency to favor incumbents over challengers from the same party. In Senate races, Republicans were 2 percentage points more likely than Democrats to vote for incumbents (see Figure B1 in Appendix B).

The question thus arises as to why conservatives would exhibit stronger incumbency effects

than liberals while, at the same time, Republicans did not consistently exhibit stronger incumbency effects than Democrats. The most plausible explanation, we suggest, has to do with the distinction between system justification, which is an asymmetrical ideological motivation, and group justification, which is a symmetrical partisan or identity-based motivation (Jost, Hennes, & Lavine, 2013; see also Clifford, 2017; Greene, 1999). The psychological tendency to favor the status quo, we contend, is linked to political conservatism in general rather than affiliation with the Republican Party in particular (Jost, 2020). In the time of Abraham Lincoln, for instance, the Republican Party was more progressive than the Democratic Party.

Although we were unable to test this possibility directly, we constructed additional regression models in which we added a three-way interaction involving the respondent's ideological orientation and party identification as well as the partisan affiliation of the incumbent. The results, which are illustrated in Figure B2 in Appendix B, show that for those voters whose ideology "matches" their party identification (liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans), who represent by far the largest group of voters, conservatives were more likely than liberals to vote for incumbents in Senate (but not House) elections. On the basis of the evidence as a whole, it would appear that the asymmetry in incumbency bias is attributable to political ideology rather than identification with the Republican Party.

Additional Robustness Checks

The data set for the House of Representatives included several other variables that enabled us to address alternative explanations for the ideological asymmetry in incumbency bias.⁹ One potential concern is that—to the extent that districts are invariably "red" or "blue"—our conclusions are based disproportionately on how people in (a) heavily conservative areas respond to Republican incumbents and Democratic challengers and (b) heavily liberal areas respond to Democratic incumbents and Republican challengers. If true, this might limit the generalizability of our findings.

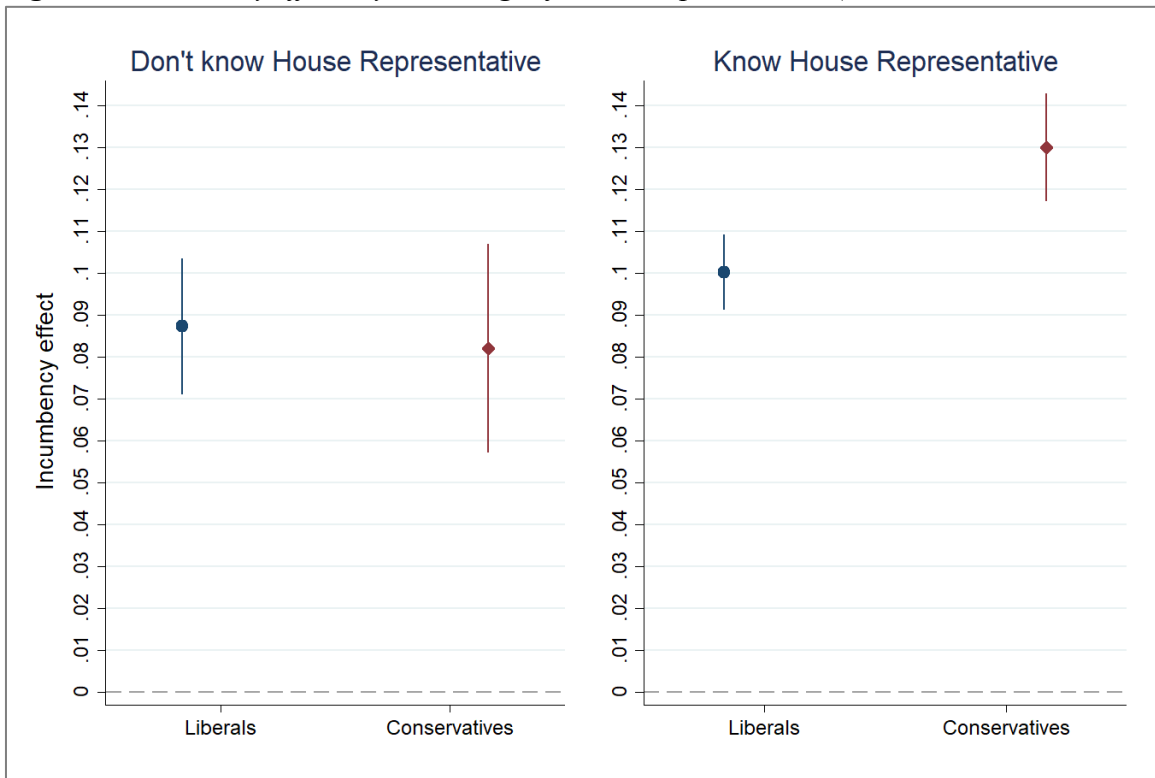
⁹ Some of these alternative explanations were proposed by anonymous reviewers; we are grateful for their ingenuity and thoughtfulness.

Incumbency Advantage in Congress

To rule out this possibility, we conducted additional analyses in which we selected only those Congressional districts that showed actual variation in terms of the partisanship of incumbents during the period of study. That is, we considered only districts that had both Democratic and Republican incumbents, while also adjusting for district fixed effects. The ideological asymmetry was indeed observed in these districts. As shown in Table A3, conservatives were 11 percentage points—whereas liberals were 7 percentage points—more likely to vote for incumbents (vs. challengers) from the same party (see Model 3).

A second possibility is that media congruence is higher in rural than urban areas and, if so, incumbents may receive more extensive (or more favorable) media coverage in Republican-leaning than Democratic-leaning districts. If this is the case, the advantage in terms of media congruence might translate into an incumbency advantage for Republican over Democratic candidates (see also Snyder & Stromberg, 2010, for a similar argument). Although we were unable to compare differences in how the media covered these races, we were able to investigate the role of candidate familiarity. To rule out the possibility that—because of regional patterns of media coverage or consumption—the ideological asymmetry we observed was attributable to the fact that Republican incumbents were better known than Democratic incumbents, we conducted another internal analysis based on whether survey respondents were or were not capable of identifying the incumbent candidate. As shown in Figure 3, when the analysis was restricted to respondents who successfully recalled who their sitting Representative was, conservatives were 13 percentage points more likely to vote for incumbents (vs. challengers) from the same party, while liberals were 10% more likely to do so. Among respondents who were unable to identify the incumbent, no ideological asymmetry was observed. This implies that candidate familiarity plays a key role in the incumbency effect, and it may play a meaningful role in the ideological asymmetry with respect to the incumbency effect as well.

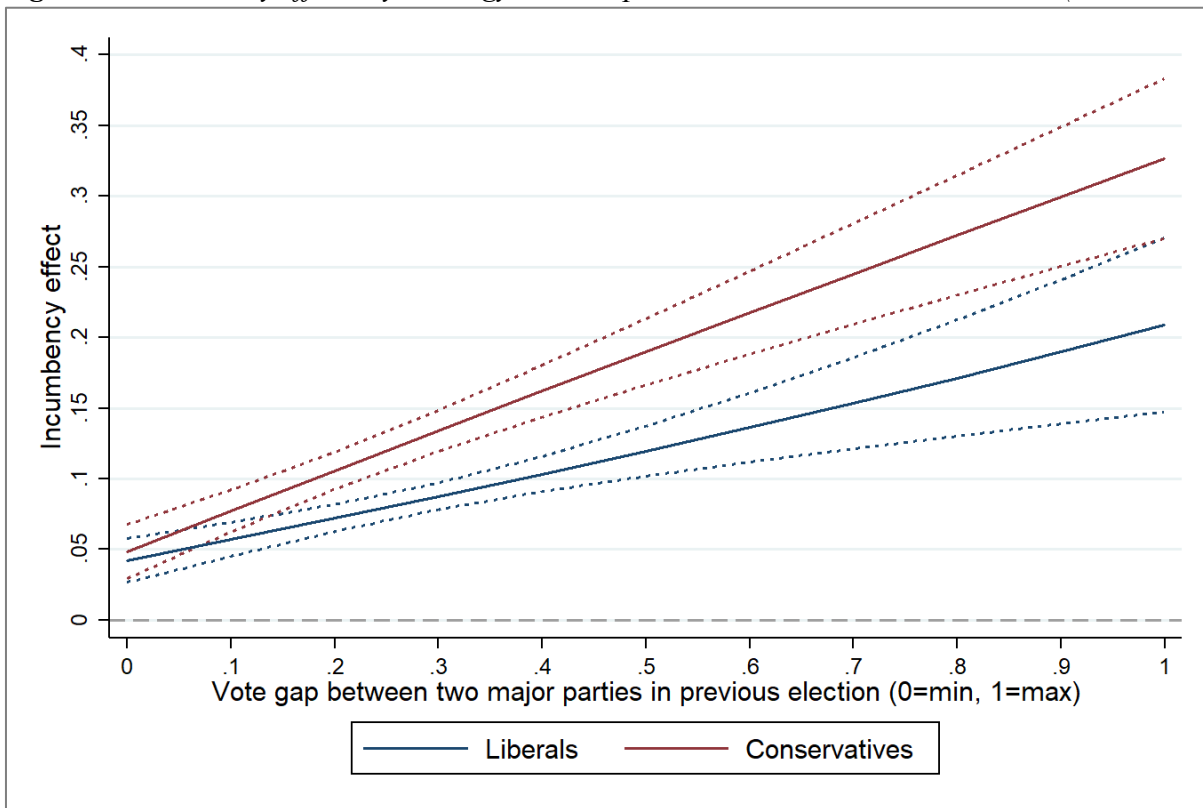
Figure 3. Incumbency effects by knowledge of House Representative (House elections, 2006-2018)



Note: Differences shown are in predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates are based on the logistic regression Model 2 in Table A2 (House), adding an interaction between candidate's incumbent status, respondent's ideology, and knowledge of House Representative. Average marginal effects by knowledge of House Representative. Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Third, we considered the possibility that—for whatever reasons—Republican incumbents (or Democratic challengers) might have been stronger or more competitive candidates than Democratic incumbents (or Republican challengers), and this could have contributed to the ideological asymmetry we observed. Lacking measures of individual candidate strength, we relied upon a proxy, namely district competitiveness, estimated as the share of the vote the incumbent's party received in the same district during the previous House election, considering only the votes for the Republican and Democratic parties. We then calculated the vote differential between the two parties and interacted it with respondents' ideology and the incumbency status of the candidates. As show in Figure 4 we observed that the ideological asymmetry was greater in districts that were less (vs. more) competitive, that is, when the incumbent defeated the other candidate by a sizeable margin in the previous election.

Figure 4. Incumbency effects by ideology and competitive districts in House elections (2006-2018)



Note: Predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party in House elections by district competitiveness. Estimates are based on the logistic regression Model 2 in Table A2 (House), adding an interaction between, and vote gap in previous election in the respondent's district. Vote gap rescaled from 0 (min) to 1 (max). Dotted lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

The results of our research program highlight a previously unrecognized source of influence when it comes to the incumbency advantage in electoral politics: political ideology. Consistent with system justification theory (Jost, 2020), politically conservative voters exhibited stronger preferences than liberal voters to maintain the status quo by supporting incumbents over challengers from the same political party. This asymmetry was observed in general elections for both Houses of Congress in the U.S. over a period including seven recent election cycles.

These findings corroborate and expand upon previous work suggesting that psychological motives may contribute to the sizeable advantage existing officeholders enjoy over challengers in Congressional elections (Eckles et al., 2014; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988). In general, citizens

clearly display a preference for electoral incumbents, but our research shows that politically conservative citizens manifest even stronger preferences than others for the status quo. Thus, we appear to have identified yet another meaningful ideological asymmetry in political behavior (see also Jost, 2017, 2018; Morisi et al., 2019). From the perspective of system justification theory, incumbency biases may be linked to underlying differences in psychological needs to manage uncertainty, threat, and social conformity (Hennes et al., 2012; Jost, 2020). Future research would do well to explore the ways in which epistemic, existential, and relational motives condition preferences for (familiar) incumbents over (unfamiliar) challengers.

Probably the main limitation of our study stems from the fact that we focused on actual rather than hypothetical candidates. Consequently, we are comparing votes for different Democratic vs. Republican candidates. It is conceivable, for instance, that (for unknown reasons) Democratic incumbents (or challengers) were stronger candidates than Republican incumbents (or challengers) during the period under study, and that this somehow affected the likelihood that conservatives showed stronger support than liberals for incumbent candidates in general. It is also possible that differential coverage of Democratic vs. Republican incumbents played some role in contributing to the ideological asymmetry (Snyder & Strömberg, 2010). We attempted to address this possibility by equating liberal and conservative voters in terms of knowledge about the incumbent candidate, but the role of media exposure was not something that we could analyze in this research program.

The fact that we observed larger incumbency effects in House (vs. Senate) elections is consistent with the notion that incumbency status serves as a heuristic for political decision-making. In the House of Representatives, candidates are generally less well-known than in the Senate, and incumbents' terms are much shorter. As a result, voters may expend more cognitive effort when it comes to Senate elections, and this may have the effect of decreasing reliance on heuristic cues. This possibility suggests yet another psychological reason why conservatives might exhibit stronger incumbency effects than liberals. Consistent with what we have suggested already with respect to

epistemic motivation, the thinking styles of conservatives tends to be more intuitive, association-based, and reliant upon heuristics, in comparison with liberals, whereas the thinking styles of liberals tend to be more analytic, deliberative, and systematic, in comparison with conservatives (Jost, 2017).

Intriguingly, we observed that conservatives exhibited stronger incumbency biases than liberals, but Republicans did not exhibit stronger incumbency biases than Democrats. This means that the asymmetry is attributable, it seems, to individual differences in political ideology—and its psychological concomitants—rather than identification with the Republican Party. If this is the case, it follows that left-right ideological asymmetries in the incumbency effect might well be observed in other electoral contexts outside of the U.S. This possibility awaits further testing, but it is well worth exploring.

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Is There an Ideological Asymmetry in the Incumbency Advantage? Evidence from U.S. Congressional Elections

Appendix A. Analysis by ideology

Table A1. Summary statistics

	HOUSE		SENATE	
	Total N	% of the total	Total N	% of the total
Voted for Democratic (vs. Rep.) candidate	180037	0.50	120595	0.53
Voted for Republican (vs. Dem.) candidate	180037	0.50	120595	0.47
Respondents voting in seats with Democratic incumbent and Republican challenger	180037	0.45	120595	0.61
Respondents voting in seats with Republican incumbent and Democratic challenger	180037	0.55	120595	0.39
Ideology: Very liberals	175358	0.07	117193	0.07
Ideology: Liberals	175358	0.15	117193	0.15
Ideology: Somewhat liberals	175358	0.10	117193	0.11
Ideology: Moderates	175358	0.20	117193	0.21
Ideology: Somewhat conservatives	175358	0.12	117193	0.12
Ideology: Conservatives	175358	0.23	117193	0.23
Ideology: Very conservatives	175358	0.12	117193	0.12
Party ID: Democrats	177783	0.47	119009	0.48
Party ID: Republicans	177783	0.43	119009	0.42
Party ID: Independents	177783	0.10	119009	0.10
Females (vs. males)	180037	0.50	120595	0.50
Education: No high school	180000	0.06	120566	0.06
Education: High school graduate	180000	0.29	120566	0.30
Education: Some college	180000	0.23	120566	0.23
Education: 2-year	180000	0.09	120566	0.09
Education: 4-year	180000	0.20	120566	0.20
Education: Post-graduate	180000	0.11	120566	0.11
Ethnicity: White	180037	0.78	120595	0.76
Ethnicity: Afro-American	180037	0.10	120595	0.11
Ethnicity: Hispanic	180037	0.06	120595	0.07
Ethnicity: Other	180037	0.06	120595	0.06

(Table A1 continues on next page)

Incumbency Advantage in Congress

(Table A1 continues)

	HOUSE		SENATE	
	Total N	% of the total	Total N	% of the total
Religion: Protestant	179547	0.41	120213	0.40
Religion: Roman Catholic	179547	0.21	120213	0.21
Religion: Other religion	179547	0.13	120213	0.14
Religion: Atheist	179547	0.04	120213	0.04
Religion: Agnostic	179547	0.05	120213	0.05
Religion: None	179547	0.15	120213	0.16
Economy got better	177693	0.31	118809	0.32
Economy stayed the same	177693	0.26	118809	0.26
Economy got worse	177693	0.43	118809	0.41
Challenger has held elective office	180037	0.19		
Freshman candidate	180037	0.19		
District redrawn since last election	180037	0.19		
2006	180037	0.11	120595	0.13
2008	180037	0.10	120595	0.08
2010	180037	0.15	120595	0.13
2012	180037	0.16	120595	0.17
2014	180037	0.16	120595	0.12
2016	180037	0.18	120595	0.21
2018	180037	0.15	120595	0.16
	Mean (N)	Min / Max	Mean (N)	Min / Max
Year of birth	1963 (N=180037)	1910 / 2000	1963 (120595)	1909 / 2000

Note. Weighted percentages. Respondents who did not vote for either a Democratic or a Republican candidate excluded. Open seats, uncontested races, and seats without a major Democratic candidate and a major Republican candidate excluded.

Table A2. Vote for congressional candidates by ideology and incumbent status (2006-2018) –**House**

	<i>Vote for own-party candidate, 2006-2018 (House)</i>					
	(1)		(2)		Districts with alternation only (3)	
Ideology (Liberals = r.c.)						
- Conservatives	-0.740***	(0.050)	-0.924***	(0.054)	-1.045***	(0.071)
Incumbent (other ideology = r.c.)						
- Own-ideology incumbent	1.499***	(0.070)	1.630***	(0.074)	1.160***	(0.103)
Conservatives X own-ideology incumbent	-0.585***	(0.102)	-0.694***	(0.106)	-0.342**	(0.123)
Female (vs. male)			-0.256***	(0.025)	-0.245***	(0.040)
Year of birth			-0.008***	(0.001)	-0.007***	(0.002)
Education (high school = r.c.)						
- No high school			-0.109	(0.075)	-0.182	(0.123)
- Some college			0.352***	(0.033)	0.364***	(0.052)
- 2-year			0.266***	(0.042)	0.352***	(0.065)
- 4-year			0.451***	(0.034)	0.438***	(0.054)
- Post-graduate			0.509***	(0.040)	0.516***	(0.066)
Race (White = r.c.)						
- Black			-1.689***	(0.043)	-1.683***	(0.074)
- Hispanic			-0.820***	(0.056)	-0.817***	(0.098)
- Other			-0.185***	(0.052)	-0.068	(0.084)
Religion (Protestant = r.c.)						
- Roman Catholic			-0.343***	(0.033)	-0.308***	(0.051)
- Other religion			-0.217***	(0.038)	-0.231***	(0.064)
- Atheist			0.328**	(0.104)	0.142	(0.176)
- Agnostic			0.057	(0.081)	-0.069	(0.134)
- None			-0.277***	(0.041)	-0.248***	(0.069)
Economy (stayed the same = r.c.)						
- Got better			0.118**	(0.036)	0.182**	(0.061)
- Got worse			0.315***	(0.033)	0.358***	(0.054)
Congressional district fixed effects	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Year fixed effects	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Pseudo R ²	.107		.152		.122	
N	143782		141829		53258	

Note: Logistic regression of voting for own-party candidate (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for House of Representatives (2006-2018). Coefficients are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. Model 3: districts where the partisan affiliation of the incumbent changed at least once between 2006 and 2018. Pooled data from Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES). All variables are from pre-election waves, apart from the dependent variable from post-election waves. Weighted data. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table A3. Incumbency effects in elections for House of Representatives (2006-2018)

	Model 1 (Table A2)			Model 2 (Table A2)			Model 3 (Table A2)		
	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>
	...when challenger	...when incumbent		...when challenger	...when incumbent		...when challenger	...when incumbent	
Liberals	0.863*** (0.004)	0.965*** (0.002)	0.102*** (0.005)	0.871*** (0.004)	0.969*** (0.002)	0.097*** (0.004)	0.895*** (0.005)	0.962*** (0.003)	0.067*** (0.006)
Conservatives	0.756*** (0.005)	0.882*** (0.003)	0.125*** (0.007)	0.749*** (0.005)	0.873*** (0.003)	0.124*** (0.007)	0.767*** (0.006)	0.874*** (0.004)	0.107*** (0.007)
<i>Difference Conservatives vs. Liberals</i>			0.023* (0.010)			0.027** (0.009)			0.040*** (0.010)

Note: Average marginal effects based on logistic regressions in Table A2 with standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients indicate the probability of voting for own-party candidates (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican). Incumbency effect: difference in probability of voting for own-party incumbent versus own-party challenger. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table A4. Vote for congressional candidates by ideology and incumbent status – Senate

	<i>Vote for own-party candidate, 2006-2018 (Senate)</i>			
	(1)		(2)	
Ideology (Liberals = r.c.)				
- Conservatives	-0.984***	(0.065)	-1.353***	(0.075)
Incumbent (other ideology = r.c.)				
- Own-ideology incumbent	0.858***	(0.080)	0.838***	(0.087)
Conservatives X own-ideology incumbent	-0.246*	(0.120)	-0.219	(0.125)
Female (vs. male)			-0.269***	(0.031)
Year of birth			-0.008***	(0.001)
Education (high school = r.c.)				
- No high school			-0.159	(0.093)
- Some college			0.401***	(0.040)
- 2-year			0.195***	(0.051)
- 4-year			0.504***	(0.041)
- Post-graduate			0.536***	(0.050)
Race (White = r.c.)				
- Black			-1.831***	(0.050)
- Hispanic			-0.916***	(0.064)
- Other			-0.258***	(0.070)
Religion (Protestant = r.c.)				
- Roman Catholic			-0.363***	(0.039)
- Other religion			-0.252***	(0.046)
- Atheist			0.166	(0.145)
- Agnostic			-0.054	(0.118)
- None			-0.410***	(0.051)
Economy (stayed the same = r.c.)				
- Got better			0.311***	(0.047)
- Got worse			0.289***	(0.040)
State fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
Year fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
Pseudo R ²	.071		.141	
N	95573		94076	

Note: Logistic regression of voting for own-party candidate (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for the Senate (2006-2018). Coefficients are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. Pooled data from Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES). All variables are from pre-election waves, apart from the dependent variable from post-election waves. Weighted data. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table A5. Incumbency effects in elections for Senate (2006-2018)

	Model 1 (Table A4)			Model 2 (Table A4)		
	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when challenger	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when incumbent	<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when challenger	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when incumbent	<i>Incumbency effect</i>
Liberals	0.905*** (0.004)	0.957*** (0.002)	0.052*** (0.005)	0.920*** (0.004)	0.962*** (0.002)	0.042*** (0.004)
Conservatives	0.783*** (0.005)	0.868*** (0.005)	0.085*** (0.008)	0.773*** (0.005)	0.855*** (0.005)	0.082*** (0.008)
<i>Difference Conservatives vs. Liberals</i>			0.033** (0.011)			0.040*** (0.011)

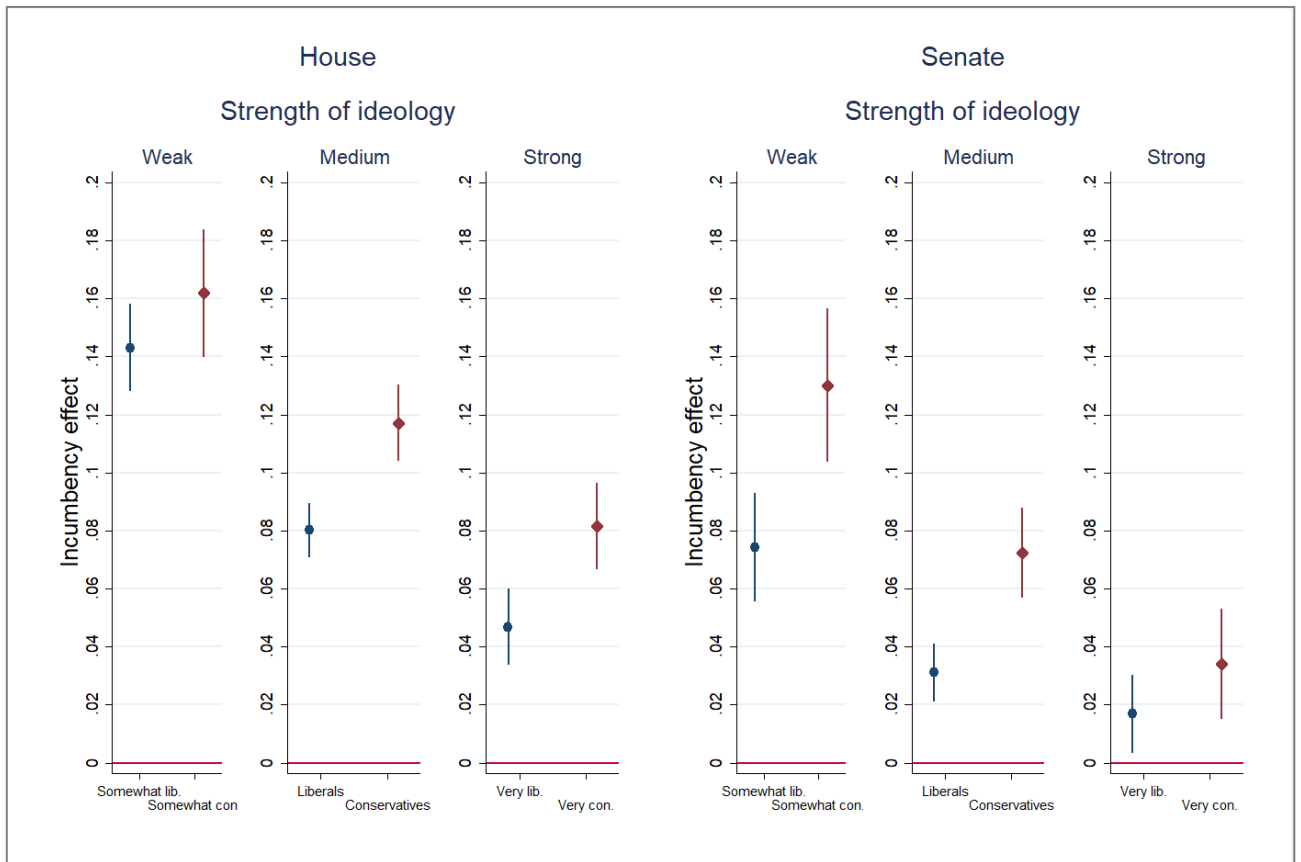
Note: Average marginal effects based on logistic regressions in Table A4 with standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients indicate the probability of voting for own-party candidates (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican). Incumbency effect: difference in probability of voting for own-party incumbent versus own-party challenger. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table A6. Incumbency effects in elections for House and Senate (2006-2018), registered voters only

	HOUSE - Model 2 (Table A2) Registered voters only (N=141476)			SENATE - Model 2 (Table A4) Registered voters only (N=93821)		
	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>
	...when challenger	...when incumbent		...when challenger	...when incumbent	
Liberals	0.871*** (0.004)	0.969*** (0.002)	0.097*** (0.004)	0.920*** (0.004)	0.962*** (0.002)	0.042*** (0.005)
Conservatives	0.750*** (0.005)	0.873*** (0.003)	0.123*** (0.007)	0.774*** (0.005)	0.855*** (0.005)	0.081*** (0.008)
<i>Difference Conservatives vs. Liberals</i>			0.026** (0.009)			0.039*** (0.011)

Note: Average marginal effects based on logistic regressions models 2 in Table A2 and Table A4 with standard errors in parentheses. Only voters who registered to vote. The coefficients indicate the probability of voting for own-party candidates (i.e., liberals voting for the Democrat and conservatives voting for the Republican). Incumbency effect: difference in probability of voting for own-party incumbent versus own-party challenger. * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Figure A1. Incumbency effects as a function of ideological strength (2006-2018)



Note: Differences shown are in predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates are based on the logistic regression Model 2 in Table A2 (House) and Model 2 in Table A4 (Senate), using a six-category instead of a two-category variable for ideology. Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix B. Analysis by partisanship

Table B1. Vote for congressional candidates by party identification and incumbent status

– House

	<i>Vote for own-party candidate, 2006-2018 (House)</i>					
	(1)		(2)		Districts with alternation only (3)	
Partisanship (Democrats = r.c.)						
- Republicans	-0.110*	(0.050)	0.012	(0.053)	-0.038	(0.064)
Incumbent (other party = r.c.)						
- Own-party incumbent	1.057***	(0.060)	1.072***	(0.060)	0.936***	(0.072)
Conservatives X own-ideology incumbent	0.339***	(0.100)	0.316**	(0.101)	0.224*	(0.107)
District fixed effects	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Year fixed effects	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Socio-demographics (gender, age, education, race, religion, evaluation of the economy)	No		Yes		Yes	
Pseudo R ²	.061		.071		.072	
N	160130		157746		59197	

Note: Logistic regression of voting for own-party candidate (i.e., Democrats voting for the Democrat and Republicans voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for House of Representatives (2006-2018). Coefficients are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. The models include the same set of covariates included in Table A2. Pooled data from Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES). All variables are from pre-election waves, apart from the dependent variable from post-election waves. Weighted data.

* p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table B2. Incumbency effects in elections for House of Representatives (2006-2018) by partisanship

	Model 1 (Table B1)			Model 2 (Table B1)			Model 3 (Table B1)		
	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate...		<i>Incumbency effect</i>
	...when challenger	...when incumbent		...when challenger	...when incumbent		...when challenger	...when incumbent	
Democrats	0.866*** (0.003)	0.948*** (0.002)	0.082*** (0.004)	0.860*** (0.003)	0.945*** (0.002)	0.086*** (0.005)	0.868*** (0.004)	0.943*** (0.003)	0.074*** (0.005)
Republicans	0.854*** (0.004)	0.958*** (0.001)	0.104*** (0.005)	0.861*** (0.004)	0.960*** (0.001)	0.099*** (0.005)	0.864*** (0.005)	0.952*** (0.002)	0.088*** (0.005)
<i>Difference Democrats vs. Republicans</i>			0.022** (0.008)			0.013+ (0.008)			0.014+ (0.008)

Note: Average marginal effects based on logistic regressions in Table B1 with standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients indicate the probability of voting for own-party candidates (i.e., Democrats voting for the Democrat and Republicans voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for the House of Representatives (2006-2018). Incumbency effect: difference in probability of voting for own-party incumbent versus own-party challenger.

+ p≤.1, * p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Table B3. Vote for congressional candidates by party identification and incumbent status

– Senate

	<i>Vote for own-party candidate, 2006-2018 (Senate)</i>			
	(1)		(2)	
Partisanship (Democrats = r.c.)				
- Republicans	-0.254***	(0.065)	-0.184**	(0.070)
Incumbent (other party = r.c.)				
- Own-party incumbent	0.841***	(0.072)	0.827***	(0.073)
Conservatives X own-ideology incumbent	0.216	(0.128)	0.290*	(0.130)
State fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
Year fixed effects	Yes		Yes	
Socio-demographics (gender, age, education, race, religion, evaluation of the economy)	No		Yes	
Pseudo R ²	.049		.061	
N	107171		105335	

Note: Logistic regression of voting for own-party candidate (i.e., Democrats voting for the Democrat and Republicans voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for the Senate (2006-2018). Coefficients are log-odds with standard errors in parentheses. The models include the same set of covariates included in Table A4. Pooled data from Congressional Cooperative Election Study (CCES). All variables are from pre-election waves, apart from the dependent variable from post-election waves. Weighted data.

* p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

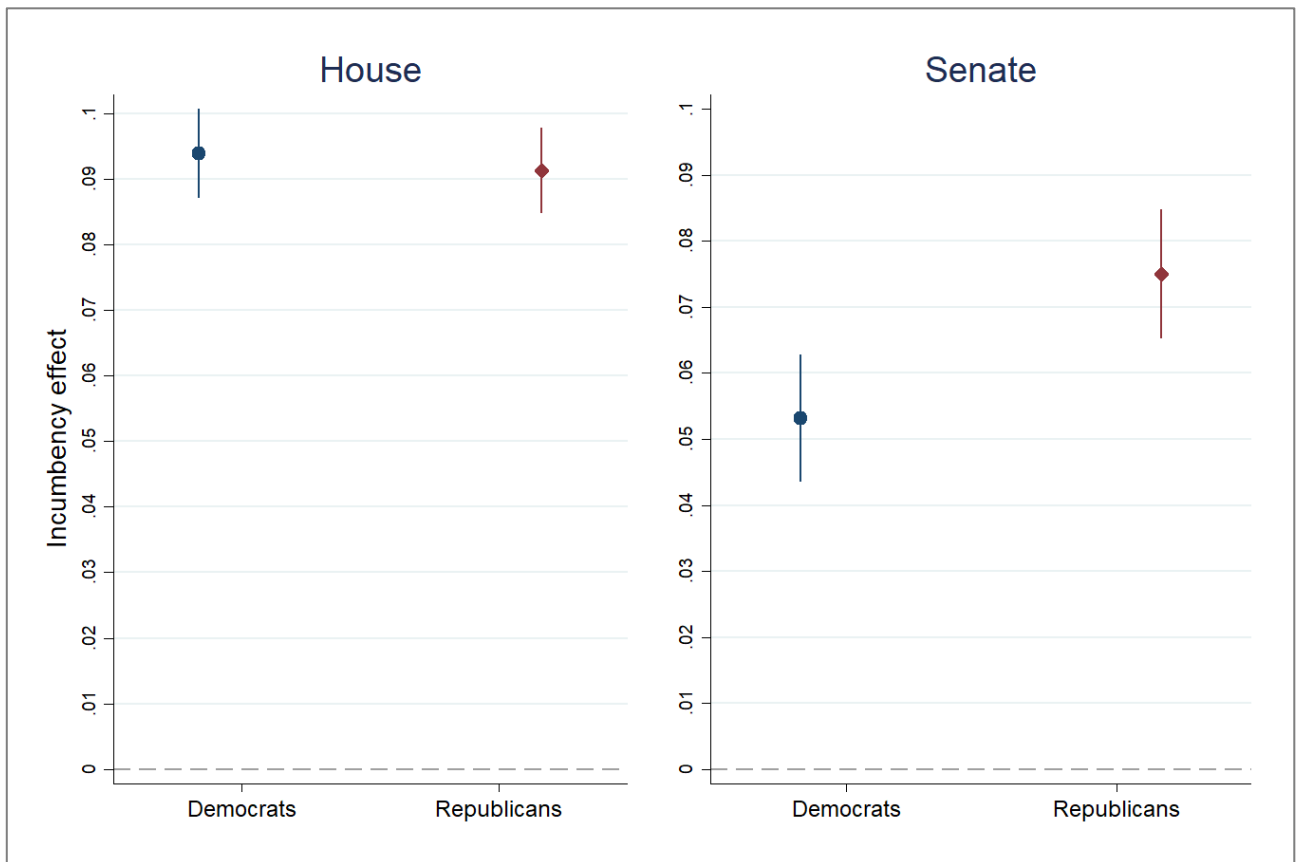
Table B4. Incumbency effects in elections for Senate (2006-2018) by partisanship

	Model 1 (Table B3)			Model 2 (Table B3)		
	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when challenger	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when incumbent	<i>Incumbency effect</i>	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when challenger	Probability of voting for own-party candidate... ...when incumbent	<i>Incumbency effect</i>
Democrats	0.903*** (0.004)	0.955*** (0.002)	0.052*** (0.005)	0.899*** (0.004)	0.953*** (0.002)	0.053*** (0.005)
Republicans	0.879*** (0.004)	0.954*** (0.002)	0.075*** (0.005)	0.882*** (0.004)	0.957*** (0.002)	0.075*** (0.005)
<i>Difference Democrats vs. Republicans</i>			0.023** (0.008)			0.022* (0.008)

Note: Average marginal effects based on logistic regressions in Table B3 with standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients indicate the probability of voting for own-party candidates (i.e., Democrats voting for the Democrat and Republicans voting for the Republican) in congressional elections for the Senate (2006-2018). Incumbency effect: difference in probability of voting for own-party incumbent versus own-party challenger.

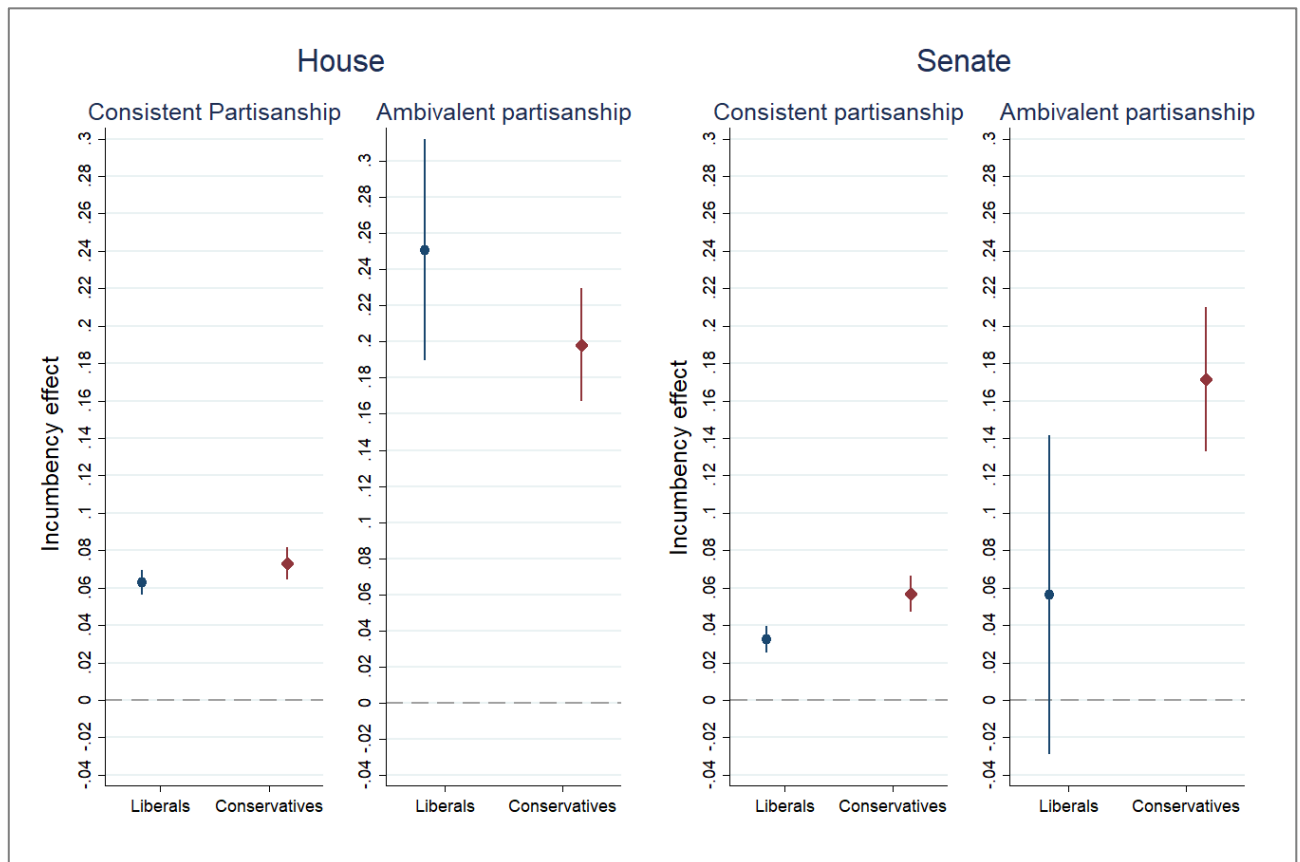
* p<.05. ** p<.01. *** p<.001

Figure B1. Incumbency effects as a function of respondent partisanship in Congressional elections (2006-2018)



Note: Differences shown are in predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates from Model 2 in Table B1 (House) and Model 2 in Table B3 (Senate). Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B2. Incumbency effects as a function of respondent ideology and partisanship in Congressional elections (2006-2018)



Note: Differences shown are in predicted probability of voting for incumbents vs. challengers (value = 0) from the same party. Estimates based on logistic regressions in Model 2 in Table A2 (House) and Model 2 in Table A4 (Senate) adding an interaction between respondents' ideology, respondents' partisanship and incumbent status. **Consistent partisans** equal to liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans (89% of the sample); **ambivalent partisans** equal to liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats (11% of the sample). Vertical bars are 95% confidence intervals.