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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the "sophomore surge," where members of Congress (MC) substantially build their margins of victory across their first term. Much of this electoral gain, Zaller finds, is due to the candidate's ability to slow the natural decay of recognition among voters. A significant fraction of whatever citizens know about their MCs is learned in the relatively partisan context of election campaigns and then generally forgotten in the inter-campaign period. Zaller, therefore, finds no great increase in name recall or recognition of first-term incumbents. There is, however, some evidence that "working the district" brings some benefits to freshmen Mcs. The rate of decline for name recognition of challengers is far larger, suggesting that district-campaign work stems the natural decline of recognition rates. In addition, affect measures rise slightly for incumbents over their first term. Though the absolute level of these changes are small, they are substantial in comparison to the affect score increases of previously elected MCs. Evidence from the Pilot Study, therefore, suggests that citizens do learn something in the inter-election period, though the less partisan nature of this information leads to less partisan assessments of MCs. Zaller also attaches an excerpt from a conference paper on the NES representative contact battery, which is not based on Pilot Study data. Using NES data from 1978 and 1980, Zaller finds an important attitudinal component in reported rates of contact with MCs. Specifically, when the incumbent is popular, both members of the MC's party and members of the outparty report nearly equal rates of contact. When the incumbent is challenged, however, reported contact levels fall and political groups polarize in the expected direction. Zaller concludes that rates of contact, which are supposed to be reports of actual behavior, in fact suffer from an endogeneity bias. Measures of candidate contact, in part, seem to be a proxy of incumbent popularity. Accordingly, models of incumbent support that are developed without regard for how dynamics of support might change in case of serious competition, may give a misleading impression of true constituent concerns.

To: NES Board of Overseers

From: John Zaller

Re: Pilot results on "Securing the District"

March 11, 1994

SECURING THE DISTRICT

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives belong to one of the most powerful legislative bodies in the world. They also enjoy one of the highest average re-election rates of any legislative body. The first fact makes the second not only interesting but important.

Some members of Congress (MCs) are elected from districts that contain, either from gerry-mandering or the tendency of like-minded people to cluster together, large majorities of voters from their own parties. Their high re-election rates do not seem notable.

What does seem notable is the success enjoyed by many MCs who do not come from districts that are in any sense naturally safe for them. In more than a few cases, skilled congressional politicians have managed to take over districts that were once safe for an MC of the other party and make them, after a few elections, safe in the other direction. Such cases have given rise to the notion of a "personal vote " — a vote that is loyal to the MC personally, independently of partisan considerations.

The 1993 Pilot study was devoted, in significant part, to studying the process by which members of Congress make their districts safe for themselves personally. What follows is a preliminary analysis of the evidence.

What exactly do we want to explain.

Many members of Congress win their first elections by something less than a landslide, and then go immediately to work to consolidate their position. In a furious round of activity, they contact as many voters, activists, and group members as possible — anyone who will talk to them — in an effort to increase their margin of electoral safety (Fenno, 1978). Their payoff is the so-called "sophomore surge," which is the amount by which incumbents' winning margin increases at the time of their first re-election (Alford and Brady, 1993). On average, the sophomore surge is about eight percentage points in share of the two-party vote.

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MCs do not, of course, cease working their districts after their first re-elections. They continue intensive activities for several more elections in the so-called "expansionist" phase of their careers. Later, in the "protectionist" phase of their careers, many members become more interested in law-making in Washington, and so scale back their district-oriented activities.

To capture these three phases of a congressional careers — that is, the sophomore surge, the more general expansionist phase, and the protectionist phase — I have estimated the following model:

$$\text{margin}_t = b_0 + b_1 \text{ (incumbent)} + b_2 \text{ (terms}_t) + b_1 \text{ (terms squared}_t)$$

where,

margin_t	=	Margin of victory is defined as percent of two-party vote minus 50
incumbent_t	=	A variable that takes the value of 0 in the member's initial election and 1 in all elections thereafter.
terms_t	=	Number of prior terms served by MC of district t.
terms squared_t	=	Terms squared.

The expectation in specifying the model in this way is that the incumbency variable will capture the "sophomore surge" that occurs at the time of the first re-election; that the variable for number of terms will capture additional gains accruing to the incumbent in later terms of the expansionist phase; and that the variable for "terms squared" will capture whatever occurs in the late years of the congressional career.

The results of applying this model to on data from the 1980 and 1990 congressional elections produces are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, almost all of what ever MCs gain in the way of a personal vote has been won at the point of their first re-election bid.

What we therefore want to know — and the question that the 1993 Pilot is almost ideally suited for shedding light upon — is what happens during MCs' first term of office that enables them to build up their winning margins so quickly.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Theories of the Personal Vote.

Although some research cites other factors, the preponderance of studies emphasize that MCs develop their personal followings by dint of strenuous efforts to woo individual voters. Anything an MC might conceivably do to impress or attract a constituent is done: Frequent visits to meet personally with people in the district, liberal use of the frank to

Figure 1. The effect of terms of service on average victory margin in 1980 and 1990 House elections.
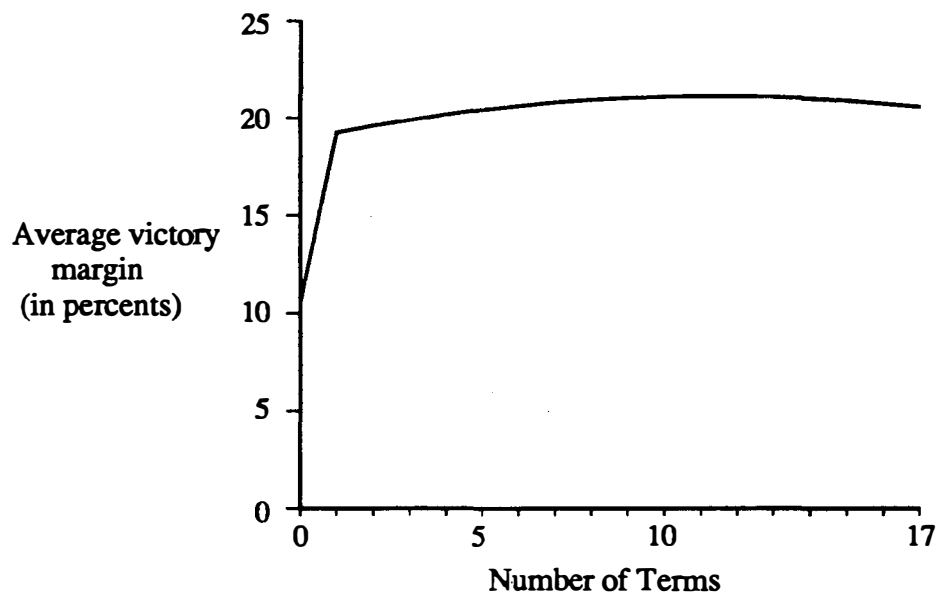
Note: Victory margin is defined as share of vote minus 50 percent. Estimates in figure are based on coefficients in Table 5.

communicate with voters, devotion of considerable staff resources to helping constituents deal with impersonal government bureaucracies, unstinting efforts to publicize one's activities, and finding locally popular measures and programs to claim credit for.

There is, it seems to me, a prima facie mismatch between any argument that stresses contact between MCs and individual voters, on one side, and the sort of "step effect" shown in Figure 1, on the other. Given the large size of contemporary districts, the low level of information about congresssional politics in most districts, and voters' minimal levels of attention to what information is present (including, I presume, mailers from the MC), a strong relationship between voters and MCs would have to develop more slowly, if it could develop at all.

Evidence That What MCs Do Makes a Difference.

The argument that MCs build up the "personal vote" by building up credit with individual voters has testable implications. It implies, among other things, that Congressmen should be substantially better known and better liked at the time of their first re-election than when they first won office.

By way of setting the stage for data from the 1993 Pilot, I present some simple tests of these implications from data from earlier NES studies. In particular, I will present data from earlier surveys on the relationship between "terms of service" and each of several indicators of the relation between MCs and their constituents, as follows:

- Name recall and name recognition.
- Degree of warmth of ratings on the feeling thermometer
- Likes and dislikes of MC

In addition, I have analyzed data on challenger and incumbent spending. For each of these indicators of political strength or weakness, I use the model in equation 1 to show how the indicator changed over the course of a typical MC's career.

The results are shown in Figures 2 through 5. As can be seen, there is no evidence of a "sophomore surge" in the two more cognitive indicators of MCs' standing, name recall and name recognition. It appears, in fact, that name recall may drop slightly between a member's initial election and the first re-election. The other indicators, however, show evidence of a sophomore surge. MCs do appear better liked at the time of their first re-election, and they also faces markedly weaker challengers, as indicated by the spending data.
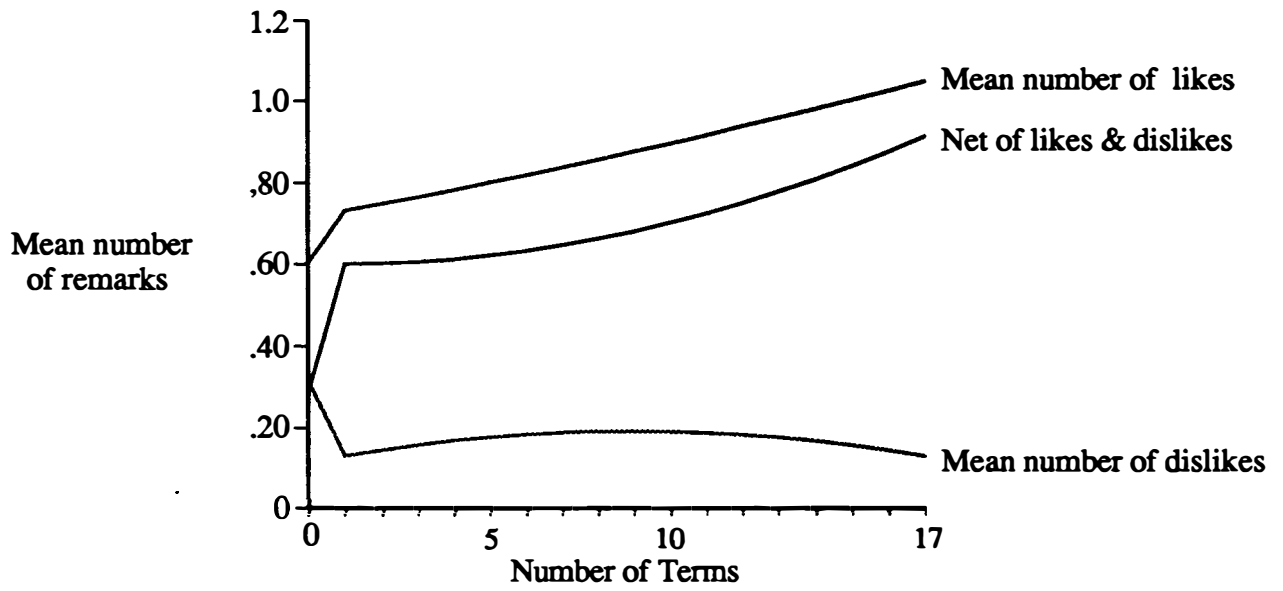
INSERT FIGURES 2, 3, 4, AND 5 HERE

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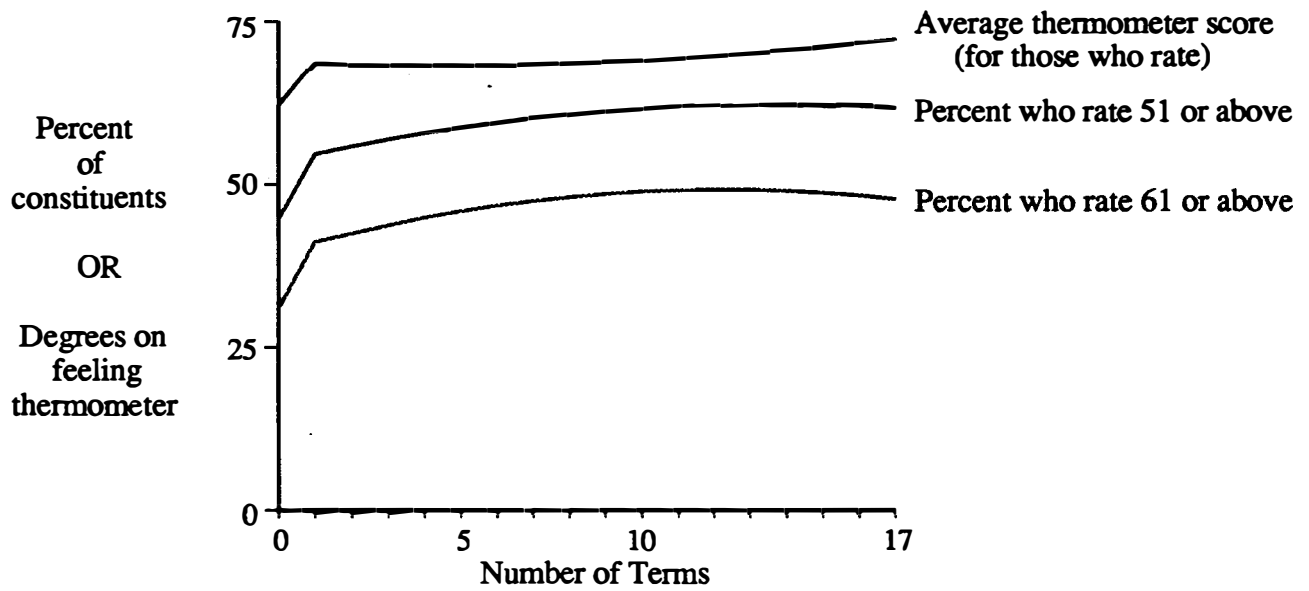*Figure 2.* How terms of service affect voter awareness of MC
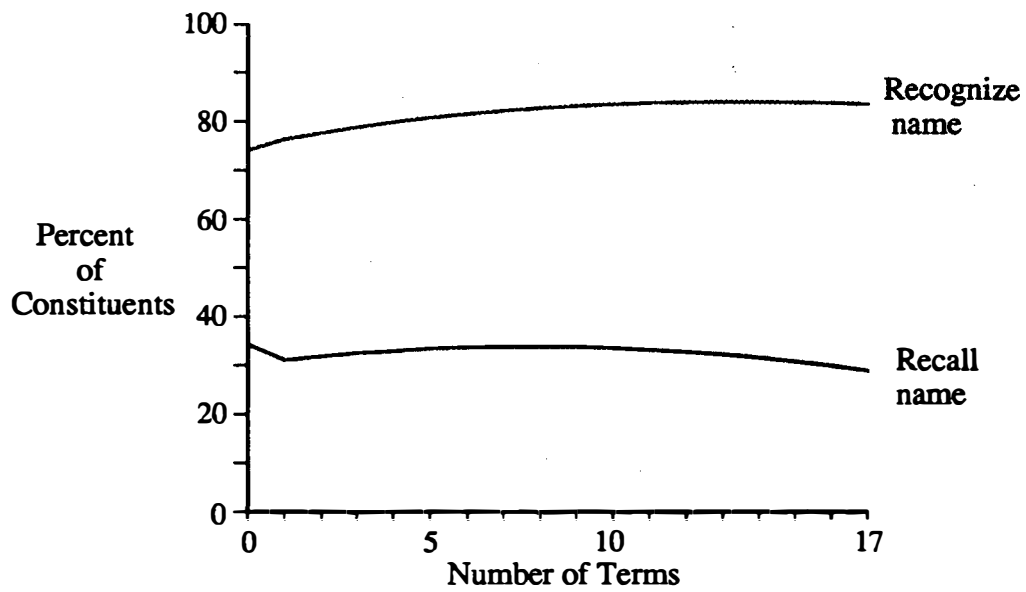
Note: Estimates based on coefficients in Table 5.

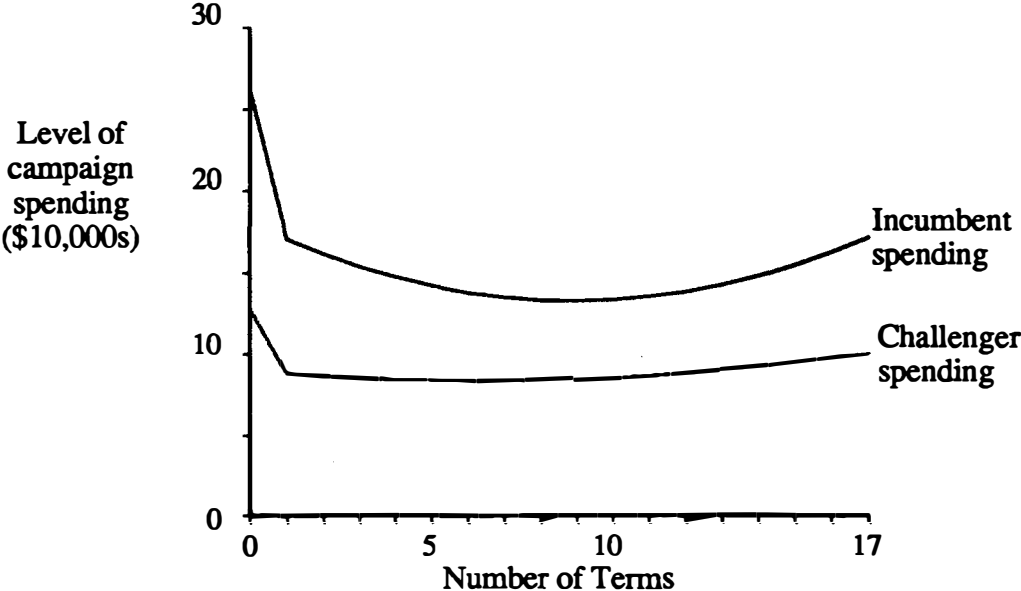*Figure 3.* How terms of service affect voter likes & dislikes of MC

Note: Estimates based on coefficients in Table 5.

Figure 4. How terms of service affect voter evaluations of MC

Note: Estimates based on coefficients in Table 5.

Figure 5. How terms of service affect level of campaign spending

Source: Spending data from the 1980 elections.

The data in Figures 2 through 5 all refer to means, which, in the case of challenger spending, is misleading. If we examine median levels of spending, we find the following: The median level of opposition spending in a race in which an MC first won election was about $115,000 in 1980; in races in 1980 involving incumbents, the median level of opposition spending was $20,000. For incumbent spending, these figures were $230,000 and $120,000.

The largest of the "sophomore surge" effects thus appears to be a downward surge in campaign spending. It is easy to imagine that a change of this magnitude in campaign spending could drive the changes in all the other indicators of sophomore surge. The argument would be that as opposition spending drops in the first re-election, information leading to "incumbent dislikes" falls off, while, at the same time, the continuation of incumbent spending at moderate levels leads to the replacement of some "incumbent dislikes" by "incumbent likes." But, at the relatively low levels of spending that occur, there is no real growth in the more cognitive indicators, namely, recall and recognition. Meanwhile, with no serious spending by the opposition party, the incumbents' winning vote margins shoot up.

This argument, however, is by no means proven. It is possible that the spending changes are a reflection of changes in constituent attitudes rather than a cause of them. Another possibility is that rising esteem for MCs among constituents leads to weaker challengers which leads to further attitudinal gains for the incumbent.

To resolve this puzzle, we need information on citizen attitudes before changes in campaign spending have any effect. The 1993 Pilot study is ideally suited to provide this sort of evidence.

Evidence From the 1993 Pilot.

The 1992 Post Election Study and 1993 Pilot Study carry versions of all the attitudinal indicators examined in Figures 2, 3, and 4. Hence we are able to get "midcourse" readings on name recall, name recognition, feeling thermometer scores, and likes and dislikes. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The first point to notice is that citizens do not seem to become more familiar with their MCs during the inter-election period; rather, the trend on the two cognitive variables — name recall and name recognition — is in the other direction. This is true for newly elected MCs, who are presumably "working their districts" especially hard, as for established MCs.

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At the same time, there is evidence that MCs are at work in their districts and that their work is having some effect. The decay rate for name recall of challengers – who in most cases do nothing to keep themselves alive in the minds of citizens – is far greater than for name recall of winning candidates. Conceivably even winning candidates would fade rapidly from the memory of voters if they did nothing to counteract the natural tendency of memory to decay.[1] [2]

The data on the three affective measures – thermometer scores, likes, and dislikes – must be summarized separately for newly elected and previously elected MCs.

For previously elected MCs, the three affect measures show no clear pattern of gains or losses. For them, therefore, the story seems to be stasis, which is exactly what figures 3 and 4 would lead us to expect for this group.

For newly elected measures, all three affect indicators, each of which is measured independently of the other, improved. This pattern would be expected to occur by chance only once out of 2^3 trials, or one in eight. The data thus give a reasonably strong indication that some real change occurred.

The magnitudes of the overtime changes for newly elected MCs are, in absolute terms, unimpressive: A mean increase of .06 likes on a scale that potentially runs from 0 to 5, a mean decrease of .01 dislikes on the same scale, and a rise of 4 degrees on the 100-point feeling thermometer. Nonetheless, using the "sophomore surge" changes in Figures 3 and 4 as the baseline, one can calculate that the comparable changes for members newly elected in 1992 are, on average, 37 percent as large – and all in only one year since election. If the new MCs continue to make gains at this rate, they will realize 74 percent of what each entering class typically gains over its first term in office, and do so before spending a penny in the fall campaign.

Before leaving these data, it should be noted that the baseline data for newly elected members in 1992 are, by the standards of Figures 2, 3 and 4, unusually low. Name recall, in particular, is only 18 percent, compared to a recall rate of 34 percent for

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[1] Winners may have impressed themselves on people's minds more strongly to begin with, but at least in the case of those who lost to new members, the difference was tiny, so this counter-explanation does not appear credible.

[2] Parenthetically, I note that a question that begins by asking respondents whether they remember who ran for congress in the last election might be a poor way of probing for information about MCs who rarely or never face a serious re-election contest, and it is surely a poor way of probing for information about name recall a year after the election has passed. To put it the other way around, it is very likely that level of incumbent name recall would be higher if respondents were asked flatly, "Do you happen to know the name of your local congressman?" There is probably nothing that can be done about this in midterm studies, but in general elections, we might ask a straight recall question on the pre-election survey.

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Table 1

Voter Awareness of Incumbent House Member
At Election Time and One Year Later

	Newly elected members		Previously elected members	
	Post election	Pilot Study	Post election	Pilot study
Percent who recall name	18	17	33	23
Percent who recognize name	74	68	83	82
Mean number of likes	.44	.51	.81	.78
Mean number of dislikes	.24	.23	.31	.2365
Mean thermometer score	54	58	57	57
Percent who rate at 51 or above	36	37	48	45
N=	154		592	
Percent who recall challenger's name	17.53	6.49	13.10	3.19
N=	154		565	

winning candidates in Figure 2. Similarly, the mean thermometer score is 54 in 1992 compared to a norm for winning candidates of 62 in Figure 4.

Baring some sort of coding error by me – not an impossibility by any means, though I have double checked myself many times – the most likely explanation is compositional. This year's freshman class, including the NES sample of it, contains more minority MCs than usual, and such MCs tend to come from big city districts in which congressional politics are ignored by the local media, television advertising is expensive, and races are lopsided and hence boring. All of these factors could contribute both to low initial levels of citizen awareness and affect, and to difficulty in improving on the initially low scores.

I showed in my last memo that even during the short 60 to 75 day period that NES post election surveys are in the field, citizens begin to forget the name of their MC. Table 1 now shows that forgetting continues over the first year of the inter-election period. Taken together, these findings suggest that a significant fraction of whatever citizens know about their MCs is learned in the relatively partisan context of an election campaign and then gradually forgotten in the period between elections. (The same conclusion emerged from a separate analysis of Senate election data.)

But at the same time, evidence from the Pilot suggests that citizens do learn something during the inter-election period, even if what they learn is slightly less than what they are forgetting. Since the information available to citizens in the inter-election period is far less partisan than what is available during elections, the effect of this dual learning-and-forgetting process should be to make citizens gradually less partisan in their assessment of their MCs. The following table confirms this expectation:

	Newly elected members		Previously elected members	
	Post election	Pilot Study	Post election	Pilot study
Correlation between party ID and rating of MC on feeling thermometer	.42	.30	.24	.12

As can be seen, for both previously elected and newly elected MCs, evaluations become significantly less strongly associated with party attachment over the inter-election period.

Conclusion.

A few months after the 1993 Pilot survey was conducted, potential congressional challengers were seeking to evaluate voter attitudes in the same districts sampled in the Pilot survey. To the extent that these potential challengers used surveys to help them make up their minds, we can extrapolate from the data in this memo to make an educated guess about what they might have found. On average, they would have found an incumbent who was a few percentage points less well-known than at his or her initial election, but who scored about six points higher on a feeling thermometer than a year earlier. The potential challenger would have found constituents very slightly more willing to say good things about the incumbent and even more slightly less willing to say bad things. In short, the incumbent's image would have become marginally less focused but also marginally more positive.

Would this kind of data deter any serious challenger from running? It seems unlikely. And yet if history is any guide, most serious challengers will decide to stay on the sidelines in districts with newly elected MCs, thereby at least contributing to, if not causing, a standard sophomore surge. I surmise from this that something must be going on that is not being well-captured in surveys like the 1993 Pilot.

Let me make the same point in a different way. It is a cliché of American politics that Americans hate Congress but love their congressman. This cliché, however, can be at best only half true. Americans hardly know their congressional representatives, let alone really like them.

In the 1993 NES Pilot survey, only 22 percent could recall the name of their sitting congressman. A larger number felt sufficiently confident to rate their MC on a feeling thermometer, but the results, shown below, indicate less than total affection:

0 to 49 degrees	12.1
50 degrees or don't know	44.5
51 to 100 degrees	43.4
	100%
N=	(746)

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As can be seen, MCs are more often liked than disliked. But the large number of Americans who either evaluate their MC neutrally or fail to offer any evaluation at all, in combination with the small number who can recall their MC's name, makes it hard to believe that many Americans feel very strongly attached to their MC.[3]

And yet MCs do exceedingly well in their bids for re-election, starting at their very first re-election. How can this be explained?

Surveys such as the 1993 Pilot seem useful for answering this question primarily in a negative sense: They can point clearly in the direction in which the explanation does not lie. They can show — and, as it seems to me, do show — that, whatever the actual explanation might be, it does not involve the development of any deep bonds of trust and affection between voters and their MC.[4] As far as most voters are concerned, superficial is probably the best characterization of their relationship with their MC. Relations are so superficial that surveys like NES have great difficulty figuring out who voters have voted for, because the voters are not sure.

It is, of course, essential to have surveys to give us this negative answer, for without it, we might go on indefinitely believing something that is plausible but apparently untrue.

This paper is not the place to develop elaborate explanations of incumbency advantage that make no assumptions about the development of bonds between voters and MCs. But because the ready availability of such explanations may increase the credibility of the arguments I have advanced, I would like to say a little about them.

In one of the shortest of the major sections in *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, Jacobson writes:

> Casework, trips back to the district, issuing newsletters, and all the
> other things members do to promote re-election are not aimed merely at
> winning votes n the next election... If an incumbent can convince
> potentially formidable opponents and people who control campaign
> resources that he or she is invincible, he or she is very likely to avoid a
> serious challenge and so will be invincible — as long as the impression
> holds... (p. 46)

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[3] The percent who both recalled their MC's name and rated the member at 51 degrees or higher on the feeling thermometer was 13.

[4] Perhaps the strongest evidence that MCs efforts to woo individual voters pay off comes from data on the relationship between voter contact with an MC (or congressional office) and voter support for that MC. In a separate paper, however, I show that reports of contact with an MC are endogenous, in the sense that voting for an incumbent MC is a significant cause of reported contact with the MC rather than, as most analysts have assumed, purely the effect of contact.

Rivers and Fiorina (1989), in describing the potential importance of an MC's reputation, write:

> In [some game theoretic literature], reputation refers to seemingly irrational actions taken to deter an opponent. In the context of congressional elections, possible challengers might be unsure of an incumbent's willingness to commit resources in a re-election battle beyond the apparent value of the office. By engaging in excessive amounts of constituency service, the incumbent signals his intention to fight a challenge to the bitter end. Conceivably, acquiring such a reputation would deter the entry of strong challengers so that, in the end, the incumbent would avoid a costly challenge. (p. 22)

These passages appear as short digressions in studies that devote far more attention to how incumbents build up credit with individual voters. My suggestion is that what is discussed in these passing comments is a far larger part of the story of incumbency advantage than has previously been appreciated. I note also that, from a strictly logical point of view, it could the entire story.

If I might be permitted a speculation of my own, I would like to render a slightly psychological version of the Jacobson-Rivers-Fiorina story about how potential challengers are deterred. It may be that the increase in travel allowances in the 1960s is especially important to such deterrence. Thanks to it, MCs can now, like other territorial animals, patrol their turf on a regular basis, marking trees, so to speak, in corners of the district they might previously have been unable to reach. The message they leave, as Fenno says, may be "trust me," but the tone, especially in unfriendly territory, might be more like, "trust me, you can't beat me – and you don't even need to try, because I'm happy to do all kinds of business with you on a non-partisan basis." Potential challengers, who in the past might have been able to build support in recesses of the district the MC rarely visited, would now have little or no territory they could consider a secure home base.

In short, the new perquisites of congressional office have given MCs both the means to reach and a currency for dealing with opposition elites that they did not previously possess, and this, perhaps more than anything that the masses of voters ever find out about, might explain why, as in the districts Fiorina visited in the 1970s, the local opposition has so often apparently lost its will to resist. The whole Mayhew-Fiorina-Jacobson story about the frenetic re-election efforts of MCs may be exactly right except for one detail – the primary audience of the re-election effort.

There is, however, no reason that the delivery of constituency services of various sorts need loom especially large in any account of incumbent safety. MCs who take care

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not to cast votes that could become campaign issues back home, and who provide merely reasonable levels of constitutency serice, may not need to do much else. For if potential challengers can all see that the incumbent has no chinks in his or her armor to be exploited in a campaign, they may keep to the sidelines. Incumbents do not need to buy off their opponents; they only need to convince them that there is nothing they could do to win.

In this sort of argument, voters can exercise a tremendous amount of control over their MCs without any day-to-day monitoring, and without even knowing the MC's name. The only thing voters need to do is to pay enough attention to make an informed judgment on those rare occasions when a strong challenger, by mounting a serious campaign, signals that there is reason to believe that the incumbent is no longer representing majority sentiment in his or her district.

I emphasize in closing that my whole argument has focussed on what I take to be the typical case. But in every election cycle there are some untypical cases, and it is important to realize that little if any of what I have said pertains to them. In this election cycle, for example, the most notably atypical case is that of the freshman congresswoman from Pennsylvania who changed her vote at the last minute to support the Clinton budget package. By chance, the Pilot interviewed four constituents from her district and, contrary to the general trend, the percent able to recall her name rose from 25 percent to 50 percent. Despite the sample size, there is every reason to believe this change is real. Her district is no doubt crawling with political operatives from both parties, and the local press, aware of all the activity, is probably covering her every move.

But this Pennsylvania congresswoman is not typical of her class. The typical members are the ones whose votes are not written about in the New York Times, and whose constitutents, in consequence, learn as little about their activities as most of the responedents to the 1993 Pilot study.

Recommendation.

The data from the 1993 Pilot provide important insight into the nature of the inter-election phase of congressional politics, thereby filling a critical void in our existing data. This contribution is now securely in place. The value of the contribution can be enhanced, however, by carrying the study forward into the 1994 elections. Among other things, such a continuation would enable us to see to what extent, if any, constituent attitudes — both for newly elected and previously elected MCs — are a "cause" of the challenges that will, in at least a few cases, materialize in 1994.

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The Contact Battery

In a paper from last summer, I took a critical look at what can be learned from the congressional contact battery that is a core feature of NES and the source of the strongest evidence that what MCs do has a direct effect on voter attitudes. The conclusion I reached is "not much." Although this argument is phrased as an attack on "existing scholarship," it would seem to have implications for the data that are the basis of that scholarship. I therefore append this material for any members who might be interested in it. If I have made any mistakes (besides coding errors, which I live in constant fear of but no one else can save me from) I would obviously like to know it.

To be clear: What follows is not my report on the 1993 Pilot; it is simply related material that also has relevance to ongoing NES business.

... Numerous studies have investigated the effects of member activity on different aspects of electoral security, and many have turned up null or even negative results. That is, studies have found that more frequent trips home, higher levels of federal expenditure in a member's district, devotion of a greater fraction of staff to case work, and heavier use of the frank are _not_ typically associated with larger winning margins or other, less direct indicators of electoral safety.[5] Perhaps the strongest of the positive evidence is found in a paper by Cover and Brumberg (1982) on the effects of sending baby care information with the MC's name on it to new parents, but the general significance of this study is unclear. The most comprehensive examination of the subject, that devedloped in Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987, Chapter 6), presents evidence that is decidedly mixed, at least for the American case.[6]

As Fiorina (1981) was the first to argue, this generally weak evidence cannot be taken at face value. The incumbents who work the hardest to cultivate support in their districts may well be the ones who are weakest to begin with, and could be working the hardest because they are the most desperate. If so, higher levels of effort could be associated with low levels of political support — even if the efforts themselves are effective in increasing support.

The only study to take full account of this problem is Rivers and Fiorina (1989). They report that, after making an appropriate modeling correction for endogeneity bias, they obtained strong, positive links between member activity and an indicator of political support in the district. The model used in their analysis, however, depends on

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[5] See review in chapter 5 of Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina (1987).

[6] Rivers and Fiorina (1989, p. 34) appear to admit this weakness by way of motivating their reanalysis of data from this study. I discuss their reanalysis below.

an identification assumption that is, as I will now seek to show, both dubious on its face and empirically false.

The basic model in the Rivers and Fiorina paper may be written as:

$$y_{it} = x_{it}b + z_t g + (h_t + e_{it}) \qquad (1)$$

where

y_{it} = The incumbent's rating for helpfulness by the ith individual in the tth district

x_{it} = Individual characteristics of the it^{th} respondent.

z_t = District-level measure of the level of effort by the incumbent.

b, g = Coefficient vectors.

h_t = Component of error term, constant across all persons living in same district, capturing unmeasured part of incumbent's reputation.

e_{it} = Component of error term unique to each person

Certain restrictions are, as Rivers and Fiorina show, necessary to obtain consistent estimates of the coefficients in this model, including the restriction that $E(h_t|x_{it}) = 0$. That is, the model assumes that there is no covariation between unmeasured components of the MC's reputation and characteristics of individual respondents.

Two of the individual-level characteristics assumed to be independent of the MC's reputation are whether the individual reports some form of contact with the MC, and whether the person reports having been very satisfied the contact. These are, I maintain, dubious assumptions, since respondents living in districts in which an incumbent has a good reputation may be more likely to contact him or her with a problem, and also more likely to report satisfaction with the contact, given that it has occurred. It is not obvious that this endogeneity problem is any less serious than the one that that Rivers and Fiorina are attempting to fix.

There is, in addition, danger of another kind of endogeneity bias, namely, that respondents may feel psychologically induced to report contact with popular incumbents even when no contact has actually occurred. The danger of such misreport, moreover, may be especially great in cases in which the incumbent has a good reputation, thereby compounding the problem. There is evidence, as I will now show, that this hypothetical danger is quite real.

In 1978 and 1980, the NES drew samples that were representative of the nation as a whole and of each of the 108 individual Congressional districts in the sample. Since the districts sampled were the same in each year, this sampling scheme makes it possible to compare the attitudes and reported behaviors of constituents in particular districts

across time — and, critically, to see if key individual-level indicators vary with the incumbents' current reputations.

To measure changes in the current reputations of MCs, I examined changes in electoral margins in the 1978 and 1980 elections, and, in particular, changes in which an MC's margin substantially declined between the two years. My assumption was that declining electoral margins would signify tougher campaigns, and that tougher campaigns would damage the reputations of MCs.

The key dependent variable in my analysis will be two of the individual-level indicators used in the Rivers and Fiorina analysis, namely, whether the respondent reports having ever contacted the MC's office, and whether, if contact occurred, the respondent was "very satisfied" with the outcome. My question thus becomes: Do declines in the MC's reputation, as measured by vote margins, affect the likelihood of reports that one has ever contacted the MC's office and been satisfied with the result?

For at least some groups, the answer is yes. Table 1 presents data on rates of contact and contact satisfaction among independents and out-party members who resided in districts in which an an MC's margin of victory declined substantially between 1978 and 1980.[7] As can be seen, 17 percent of these people reported in 1978 that they had at some time contacted the office of the incumbent, and 8 percent said that the contact had been "very satisfactory," which indicates that about half of those who reported a contact were well satisfied. But in 1980, in the aftermath of tough election campaigns for their MCs, the percent that reported having ever contacted the MC fell to 6 percent, and the percent who reported a very satisfactory contact fell to zero. The two-tailed prob-values for these over-time differences among constituents in the same districts indicate they are unlikely to be due to chance fluctuation.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

No such decline in reported contact rates shows up among constituents having the same party as the incumbent MC. Indeed, as analysis of other indicators will show in a moment, partisans of the congressional inparty may have become more likely to report certain forms of contact with their MC.

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[7] Districts meeting this criterion were ones in which the incumbent won at least 60 percent of the vote in a contested election in 1978, but had his or her victory margin in 1980 either cut in half or reduced by 10 percentage points, where margin was measured as (% of two-party vote minus 50 percent). So someone whose vote share fell from 61 to 52 percent would meet this criterion, as would someone whose vote fell from 80 to 70 percent. Seven of the 108 districts in the NES sample met the criterion, as listed in Table 1. Districts with uncontested races in 1978 were excluded on the grounds that a drop from 100 percent to 90 percent would not involve a significant diminution of reputation, but only the presence of token opposition.

Table 1. *Changes in reported rates of contact with MC's who become involved in closer races.*

	Contaced office	Very satisfied with contact
Among independents and members of outparty		
1978 (n=71)	.17	.08
1980 (n=53)	.06	.00
Difference	-.10	-.07
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	.06	.03
Among members of MC's party		
1978 (easy races): (n=71)	.24	.17
1980 (harder races): (n=53)	.22	.15
Difference	-.02	-.02
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	-	-

Note: Based on reported rates of contact in California 2, Georgia 4, Illinois 21, Maryland 2, Missouri 9, Ohio 9, and Texas 10.

Source: National Election Studies surveys.

These empirical results raise doubts about the plausibility of one of the identifying assumptions in the Rivers and Fiorina analysis, an assumption that was, as I earlier suggested, dubious even on face inspection. Hence their conclusions concerning robust effects of MC effort on political support may be questioned.

One other bit of evidence on the effects of MC efforts to build support may be noted. While it is true that the relationship between MC effort and electoral support suffers from an endogeneity bias, it need not be the case that MC effort is uncorrelated with all indicators of mass response. In particular, if some MCs are forced by political weakness to spend more time campaigning in their districts, painstakingly building up support one voter at a time, their constituents ought at least to report meeting the MC more often than do people in districts in which secure MCs spend most of their time in Washington.

Such, however, is apparently not the case. Constituents who live in districts in which MCs spend more time are not only not more likely to like them, they are also not more likely to report meeting the MC (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1987, p. 164).[8] This finding can only be considered surprising — unless, as I have just suggested, reported levels of contact with MC are not measures of actual contact but of attitudes toward the incumbent. In that case, it would be expected that MCs would spend the most time campaigning in districts in which few people claimed to have met them.

Survey evidence of the effects of MC activities. By far the most consistent and apparently robust evidence of the effects of MC activities comes from mass opinion data that has not been linked to direct indicators of MC activity. In numerous studies, analysts have shown that voters who report contact with MCs or their staff, or who favorably evaluate their MC's efforts to service the district, are more likely to vote and otherwise exhibit support for the MC.

Such findings fit nicely with studies of how members campaign among their constituents and try to secure federal largesse for their districts. However, these findings appear to suffer from various forms of endogeneity bias. My argument in this section is that this bias is sufficiently serious as to greatly undermine what would otherwise be the strongest evidence for the standard view of how MCs generate a personal vote for themselves.

I begin with data on constituents who claim to have personally met their MC. I focus on this indicator of contact with MCs because it appears on its face to be among the most

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[8] The strongest positive district-level correlate of reported contact with MCs is the size of the MC's Washington staff; yet, as Cain et al. report despite its poor reflection on their position, possessing a larger Washington staff is associated with fewer rather than more trips home to the district.

concrete and hence least susceptible to psychologically-induced misreporting, and also because it is easier in this case than in others to figure out what plausible rates of MC contact ought to be.

The first point to make is that reported rates of personal contact with MCs are implausibly high. Consider, by way of setting expectations for reasonable rates of contact, the following passage from Jacobson (1992):

> Most politicians have faith in the personal touch; if they can just talk to people and get them to listen, they can win their support. There is some evidence for this notion. Larry Pressler, now a senator from South Dakota, won his first House election in 1974 with a campaign that consisted largely of meeting people one-on-one. "I tried to shake 500 hard hands a day," Pressler has said. "That is where you really take their hand and look at them and talk to them a bit. I succeeded in doing that seven days a week. I put in a lot of twelve-hour days, starting at a quarter to six in the morning at some plant in Sioux Falls or Madison." Pressler estimates that he shook 300 to 500 hands per day for 80 days. "You would not believe the physical and mental effort this requires..."

The difficulty with this approach to winning office, as Jacobson goes on, is that "It is simply impossible to meet more than a small fraction of the electorate during a single campaign." This contention is surely correct. Let us take Pressler, who gained fame for having met something like the maximum number of people it is possible to meet in a campaign. Meeting 400 people per day for 80 days comes out to 32,000 people. If we take a contemporary congressional district as having about 525,000 people, and if we assume that 70 percent of them are above voting age, then the number of people Pressler met would constitute about 8.7 percent of the voting age population of the district.

In light of this caculation of what is possible with maximum effort, what is one to think when one discovers that, on average (!), nine percent of voters from districts with winning challengers in 1980 — that is, candidates winning Congressional office for the first time — claimed to have met the winner, and that this average figure was 24 percent in 1982?[9]

One can, of course, note that many contacts (even in Pressler's campaign) must involve something less than "really tak[ing] their hand and look[ing] them in the eye and talk[ing] to them a bit." One can also make some allowance for the possibility that

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[9] The n's for these percentages are 59 and 31; Jacobson, 1992, Table 5.17. I have also calculated that the percent of voters claiming to have met the winner of open seat contests was 11.3 percent, in 1978 and 1980, based on 191 cases in the two years.

candidates meet a higher proportion of voters than of all constituents,[10] and that a few voters may have met candidates in connection with campaigns for other offices.[11]

But even after making these allowances, it is hard to avoid concern that reported rates of contact are very suspiciously high. The next question, therefore, is whether the suspected over-reporting is random, or whether it is systematically related to the respondent's attitude toward the MC.

There is, of course, a relationship between reports of contact with an MC and support for the MC – a relationship in which contact is assumed to cause support rather than vice versa. It is obviously reasonable to assume that contact might engender support, but it is also reasonable to wonder whether support might not also engender *reports* of contact. In view of this ambiguity, one cannot, by using survey data alone, tell whether reports (or overreports) of contact are systematically related to attitude toward the MC.

My solution to this problem is, once again, to find out whether changes in the incumbent's reputation, as measured by changes in the margin of electoral safety, engender changes in the likelihood of reports of various forms of contact with the MC. If overreport of contact with MCs is, as I suspect, systematically related to attitude toward the MC, reported rates of contact should decline in cases in which the MC becomes less popular, as measured by declines in electoral margin.

To investigate this possibility, I returned to data from respondents in the 1978 and 1980 NES studies whose MC suffered a decline in electoral fortunes in 1980. Table 2 shows the levels of contact these respondents reported with their MCs in each election study. As can be seen, the table shows that while independents and members of the Congressional outparty became less likely to report various forms of contact with their

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[10] Yet, a person shaking hands with as many people as Pressler would have had to be pretty indiscriminate, contacting them at factories, shopping centers, and wherever people congregate. If so, the bias in favor of meeting voters might not have been very great.

[11] Some might also argue that some people claiming to have met a candidate may, in reality, have seen the candidate at an event, and so be reporting an actual behavior. This would seem reasonable if respondents were given no other opportunity for indicating that they had seen the MC or candidate at a meeting. But they are given this opportunity, and quite clearly so. Hence, those who say they have met the MC when they only attended a meeting at which the MC was present are reporting an attitude, with all the subjectivity that implies, rather than a behavior.

Measurement of contact with the MC is as follows: Respondents are given a seven-item show card listing various forms of contact and asked whether they learned about the person "in any of these ways." Those answering yes are then asked to indicate which types of contact they have had. "Met [X] personally" is listed first on the showcard, followed by "attended a meeting or gathering where [X] spoke." Except for having a desire to report more contact than actually occurred, respondents are well able, if they wish to do so, to indicate that they only saw the candidate at a meeting.

MC as he/she became more electorally vulnerable, members of the MC's own party became, on average, slightly more likely to report contact (see column for total contacts). To test the statistical significance of this tendency toward party polarization in reported rates of contact, I estimated a regression model in which total contact was the dependent variable and a term for party X year was one of the independent variables. As can be seen in Table 3, the coefficient for the interaction term is statistically significant at the .05 level on a two-tailed test.

INSERT TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE

These results indicate that there is an important attitudinal component in reported rates of contact with MCs: When the incumbent is popular, partisan groups report nearly equal rates of contact (as shown by the small and non-significant main effect coefficient for party in Table 3). When the incumbent is challenged, reported contact levels fall (as indicated by the coefficient for year) and partisan groups polarize, with the MC's own partisans becoming more likely to report contact and outpartisans less likely to report contact (as indicated by the term for party X year).[12]

These results, demonstrating that reports of contact with an MC behave like ordinary political attitudes, undermine the validity of studies that use reports of contact with MCs as exogeneous variables in models intended to explain why constituents vote for or favorably evaluate their MCs. These contact variables, moreover, were selected for analysis because they are supposed to be reports of actual behavior, and as such relatively free of endogeneity bias. If even they suffer from it, most of the other variables commonly used as independent variables in analyses to demonstrate the effects of MC activities on constituents are even more dubious. These include questions about such matters as whether the respondent thinks the MC has done "anything special" for the district, and whether the respondent thinks the MC would be "very helpful, somewhat helpful, or not very helpful" if asked to assist with a problem.

Are there any measures which escape the problem of endogeneity bias? Happily, yes. As shown in Table 4, data from the same districts that became more competitive in 1980 indicate that purely cognitive measures of constituent reaction to their MCs are unaffected by diminution of the member's reputation. This will be useful information to keep in mind in evaluating the findings presented in the next section.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

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[12] The interaction term is strongest for the "personally meet" variable, for which the year X party interaction is significant at $p = .024$, two-tailed.

Table 2. *Changes in reported rates of contact with MC's who become involved in closer races.*

	Met MC in person	Attend meeting with MC	Meet staff	Contacted office	Very satisfied with a contact	Total contacts[a]
Among independents and members of outparty						
1978 (easy races): (n=71)	.15	.13	.07	.17	.08	.52
1980 (harder races): (n=53)	.06	.06	.04	.06	.00	.21
Difference	-.10	-.07	-.03	-.11	-.08	-.31
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	.09	.19	-	.06	.03	.05
Among members of MC's party						
1978 (easy races): (n=71)	.38	.16	.10	.24	.17	.68
1980 (harder races): (n=53)	.44	.14	.17	.22	.15	.80
Difference	+.06	-.02	+.07	-.02	-.02	+.11
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	.21	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Based on reported rates of contact in California 2, Georgia 4, Illinois 21, Maryland 2, Missouri 9, Ohio 9, and Texas 10.

[a] Total contacts sums reports of meeting the MC, attending a meeting where the MC spoke, meeting with the staff of the MC, and contacting the MC's office. The satisfaction variable is not included.

Source: 1978 and 1980 National Election Studies surveys.

Table 3. *Party, electoral margin, and contact rates.*

Intercept	0.59
Party (-1 to +1)	0.06 (.09)
Year (0-1)	-0.14 (.13)
Party X year	.27 (.14)
N=	264
R-square	.

Note: Includes districts in which MC became more electorally vulnerable between 1978 and 1980, as described in note to Table 2. The party variable is scored in the direction of the incumbent MC. Dependent variable is "total contact" variable from note a of Table 2.

Source: 1978 and 1980 National Election Studies surveys.

Table 4. *Changes in awareness of MC's who become involved in closer races.*

	Percent recall name	Percent recognize name
Among independents and members of outparty		
1978 (easy races): (n=71)	35	80
1980 (harder races): (n=53)	35	85
Difference	-1	+5
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	.89	.54
Among members of MC's party		
1978 (easy races): (n=71)	39	89
1980 (harder races): (n=53)	43	90
Difference	+.04	-2
Two-tailed prob. value of difference	.68	.73

Note: Based on reported rates of contact in California 2, Georgia 4, Illinois 21, Maryland 2, Missouri 9, Ohio 9, and Texas 10.

Source: 1978 and 1980 National Election Studies surveys.

..... As is well-known, the majority of Congressional races are not much more than nominally competitive. What this means is that hopelessly inexperienced and underfunded challengers go up against incumbents who have as much money as they want to spend and great skill as campaigners. If evidence from Senate elections (Westley, 1991) is any guide, the mass media, which tend to ignore House politics in the best of circumstances, pay no attention at all to these low-key races.

This raises the question: What can researchers really learn about how constituents feel about their MCs, or what kinds of appeals constituents are most likely to respond to, from data collected in very low-key races in which there is no serious challenger? The suggestion from the data in Table 6 would seem to be: Not as much as first meets the eye.

An illustration of the problems that may arise from using samples that are seriously unrepresentative of the conditions MCs encounter in the rare elections that mean something is presented in Table 7. A standard finding of the existing literature is that contemporary voters are much less partisan than they once were. The extent to which that claim is true, however, appears to depend on the extent to which it is tested in typical congressional elections or more competitive ones. To make this point, I estimated a model in which the MC feeling thermometer is the dependent variable, and the independent variables are party attachment, candidate spending, and party attachment X challenger spending. As can be seen, the impact of party varies strongly with level of challenger spending. It can be readily calculated, for example, that the impact of party more than doubles over its baseline rate for cases in which the challenger spends $300,000 or more (i.e., roughly the amount that, according to Jacobson, is necessary to mount a credible congressional challenge).[13]

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

The simple model in Table 7 is intended for illustrative purposes only. Yet what it illustrates is, I suspect, quite important: That models of incumbent support that are developed without regard for how the dynamics of support may change in cases of serious competition — which is to say, the majority of incumbent support models in the literature on Congressional elections — may give a misleading impression of what constituents really care about, including, perhaps, how much they care about constituency oriented MC activity.

— From "What Have Voters Got To Do With it? Sources of Incumbent Advantage in House Elections," paper given at 1992 APSA.

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[13] The log of $300,000, expressed in tens of thousands of dollars, is 1.47; 1.47 x 3.0= 4.41, or 111 percent of the baseline effect of party attachment.

Table 7. *How challenger campiagns activate party attachment.*

Intercept	71.1
Party (-1 to +1)	3.97 (.57)
Incumbent spending (in log $10,000s)	-3.77 (1.36)
Challenger spending (in log $10,000s)	-3.00 (.82)
Chal. Spend X Party	3.00 (.77)
N= adjusted r-square	3511 .07

Note: Dependent variable is incumbent feeling thermometer. Standard errors are in parentheses. Party is scored in direction of incumbent MC.

Source: 1986, 1988, 1990 National Election Studies surveys.