# *Quality, Not Quantity: Strategic Politicians in U.S. Senate Elections, 1952–1990*

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Analyzing senatorial elections between 1952 and 1990, I estimate the impact of challenger experience in various elected offices on vote for the incumbent. Controlling for other factors, U.S. representatives gain a higher proportion of the vote than other elected officials. Consistent with Jacobson's (1990b) theory that the increase in the importance of challenger quality over time in House elections explains the decline in the proportion of marginal House seats, the importance of challenger quality and the proportion of marginal seats remained stable over time in Senate elections. After developing a challenger quality scale based upon the estimated impact of having held different elected offices, I demonstrate that potential senatorial challengers strategically take into account both local and national political and economic conditions when making their candidacy decisions.

## INTRODUCTION

In *Strategy and Choice in Congressional Elections,* Jacobson and Kernell (1983) argued that strategic decisions by quality potential challengers to U.S. House incumbents influence the outcomes of congressional elections. They measured quality by whether or not the candidate held elective office (Jacobson 1989, 1990b; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). According to their model, high-quality potential candidates, before deciding to challenge the incumbent, rationally assess national and local conditions, such as the availability of campaign funds, the state of the economy, the popularity of the incumbent, and the popularity of the president, which the candidates believe affect their chances of winning. Furthermore, even after controlling for local and national conditions, high-quality candidates do better at the polls than low-quality candidates (Jacobson 1989).

Although Jacobson and Kernell's model of strategic politicians spawned a literature on candidate quality (Abramowitz 1988; Bianco 1984; Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Born 1986; Green and Krasno 1988; Krasno and Green 1988; Squire 1989; Wilcox 1987; Wilcox and Biersack 1990), only a few studies have

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examined the applicability of their model to a broad time span of U.S. Senate elections. Two important studies of Senate elections do exist. Squire (1989) studied how several incumbent characteristics and political factors influence Senate challenger quality between 1980 and 1986 and Abramowitz (1988) conducted a thorough study of Senate election outcomes between 1974 and 1986. By exploring how several different economic and political factors influence challenger quality and a large set of election results, I hope to build upon their work.[1]

The study reported here of postwar U.S. Senate elections tests the strength of Jacobson and Kernell's model outside the environment in which it was developed. Studying candidate quality in the context of Senate elections will also allow other types of questions to be introduced. While each congressional district is home to approximately the same number of people, the population of Senate constituencies varies considerably. Does the size of the constituency affect the quality of the challenger? Jacobson (1990b) believes that the importance of challenger quality in House elections has increased over time. Is this also true in Senate elections?

## Measuring Challenger Quality

Measures of challenger quality abound in the literature on House elections. Jacobson and Kernell (1983) utilized a dummy variable which contrasts candidates with and without prior experience in public office to measure quality in House elections. Other researchers constructed more nuanced scales based upon the level of office and other candidate characteristics. Candidates who have already held public office have already been tested as candidates by the rigor of at least one previous campaign. Moreover, the higher the office, the more complex the campaign management and the greater the level of public scrutiny. Bond, Covington, and Fleisher (1985) developed a three-point quality scale based upon challenger political experience. They also used challenger campaign expenditures and a composite of their scale and expenditures to measure challenger quality. Krasno and Green (1988) gave challengers with prior elective office experience a rating of 4 and other challengers a rating of 0. They then adjusted this scale based upon other personal characteristics of the challenger. In his study of Senate elections, Squire (1989) created a seven-point hierarchical scale of offices and then multiplied this scale by the percentage of the state's population represented by the candidate in the office to create his quality measure.

All of the measures of challenger quality based on the level of prior political office make assumptions about the relative value of prior posts in running for

[1] Squire (1989) did not examine the impact of any economic factors on Senate challenger quality. I believe that his interaction of the incumbent's last vote and the ideological distance of the incumbent from the electorate obscures the influence of the incumbent's last vote. While Squire does control for whether or not the challenger and the president are members of the same party, he does not study how varying levels of presidential support affect challenger quality.

House or Senate that have little empirical justification. For example, Squire (1989) assumed that governors are higher quality challengers than U.S. representatives in Senate elections even though there is no evidence that, holding other conditions constant, representatives receive a smaller proportion of the vote than governors in Senate contests. Only after determining the relative impact of having held any particular office on the vote for the challenger can one rank offices, and thus challenger quality, on a hierarchical scale. Accordingly, I have broken down Squire's hierarchy of offices into a set of six dummy variables: *Former Senator, Governor, U.S. Representative, Lesser Statewide Official, State Legislator,* and *Local Official.* These variables are coded 1 if it is the last office the challenger occupied prior to running for Senate, and 0 otherwise.

## Predicting Incumbent Vote

### *Independent Variables*

*Political Conditions.* Regressing incumbent vote on these prior office dummy variables while controlling for other local and national political and economic variables will help determine the relative value of having held each of the offices. Previous incumbent vote will serve as a measure of local political conditions. Incumbents who won the previous election by a large margin probably have a larger base of support than incumbents who won by a narrow margin. The difference in presidential approval ratings between the October of the election year and the October of the year before the election will serve as an estimate of national political conditions. If the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are different, the change in presidential approval is multiplied by −1. Sizeable increases in presidential approval should mean that voters are more likely to support senatorial candidates of the president's party.[2] Whether or not the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are the same serves as a second measure of national political conditions. Since challengers often try to make incumbents of the president's party defend the president's record as well as their own, challengers running against these incumbents may receive a higher share of the major party vote.

[2]Presidential approval is measured as the percentage of people who responded positively to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way (*name of president*) is handling his job as president?" in Gallup Poll surveys. In calculating presidential approval, the results of all of the Gallup Poll surveys in the appropriate October were averaged to control for errors in the poll. If in a given October, the presidential approval question was asked only once, the results of this poll were averaged with the poll taken nearest to October to calculate presidential approval for that year. The change in presidential approval is used instead of the actual level of presidential approval for two reasons. First, unlike the actual level of presidential approval, the trend significantly predicts both vote for the incumbent and challenger quality. Second, the trend more sharply distinguishes presidential approval between administrations.

*Economic Conditions.* National economic conditions are widely believed to shape congressional election results (Abramowitz 1988; Bloom and Price 1975; Jacobson 1990a; Kramer 1971; Tufte 1975, 1978). Nevertheless, several scholars have argued that the state of the economy does not influence the outcome of congressional elections, particularly in midterm elections (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989; Arcelus and Meltzer 1975; Erikson 1990a, 1990b). In any case, controlling for economic fluctuations will test whether or not national economic conditions influence senatorial election results. The difference in national real disposable per capita income between the year of the election and the year before the election will gauge national economic trends. This variable will be multiplied by −1 when the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are not members of the same political party. Similarly, the difference in real disposable per capita income by state between the election year and the year before the election will measure local economic conditions. This variable will be multiplied by −1 when the incumbent governor and the incumbent senator do not share the same party label. Chubb (1988) found that the strength of the state economy influences challenger quality but has little direct effect on either gubernatorial or state legislative election results. Controlling for state economic conditions will reveal if this finding extends to senatorial elections.

*Time and Population Controls.* According to Jacobson (1990b), the importance of challenger quality in House elections has grown over time. By including year and interaction terms between year and each of the prior office dummy variables in the regression equation, one can see if this is also true in senatorial elections. In order to test whether constituency size affects senatorial vote, the number of congressional districts will be included as an independent variable in the regression model. Hibbing and Brandes (1983) argue that support for the incumbent is lower in more populous states.

*Results*

Model 1 in table 1 displays the regression coefficients and their standard errors that result from regressing incumbent vote on these independent variables for all incumbents with major party challengers. None of the interaction terms between year and the prior office dummy variables attained significance at the $p < .05$ level according to $t$-tests. As model 2 in table 1 reveals, eliminating the interaction terms does not adversely impact the fit of the model.[3] Model 2 also uncovers the relative value of prior experience in different offices in a Senate challenge. Members of the House pose the most formidable challenge to Senate incumbents.

[3]With the exception of year × former senator, none of the interaction terms came close to attaining significance even at the $p < .10$ level. A grouped $F$-test comparing model 1 and model 2 revealed that $p < .01$ that the coefficients on the interaction terms are not zero.

TABLE 1

DETERMINANTS OF INCUMBENT VOTE, 1952–1990

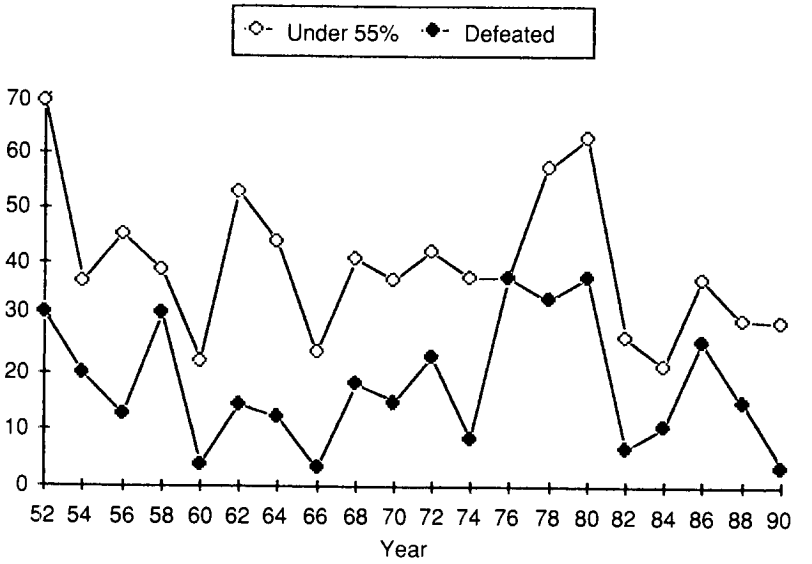
| Dependent Variable: Vote for Incumbent | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
| Independent Variables: | Coefficient | SE | Coefficient | SE |
| Intercept | .43 | (.03) | .43 | (.02) |
| Former Senator | .001 | (.04) | −.05 | (.03) |
| Governor | −.03 | (.03) | −.05 | (.01) |
| U.S. Representative | −.07 | (.02) | −.07 | (.01) |
| Lesser Statewide Official | −.04 | (.03) | −.05 | (.01) |
| State Legislator | −.04 | (.02) | −.01 | (.01) |
| Local Official | −.04 | (.03) | −.03 | (.01) |
| Previous Incumbent Vote | .32 | (.03) | .32 | (.03) |
| Change in Presidential Approval | .10 | (.05) | .09 | (.05) |
| Incument of President's Party | −.05 | (.01) | −.05 | (.01) |
| Change in Real PCI by State | .006 | (.01) | .005 | (.01) |
| Change in Real PCI Nationwide | .09 | (.02) | .09 | (.02) |
| Number of Congressional Districts | −.0008 | (.0004) | −.0009 | (.0004) |
| Year | .002 | (.001) | .002 | (.0006) |
| Year × Former Senator | −.009 | (.005) | | |
| Year × Governor | −.002 | (.003) | | |
| Year × U.S. Representative | −.0002 | (.002) | | |
| Year × Lesser Statewide Official | −.001 | (.002) | | |
| Year × State Legislator | .002 | (.002) | | |
| Year × Local Official | .001 | (.002) | | |
| Standard Error of the Regression | .08 | | .08 | |
| Number of Cases | 496 | | 496 | |

Note: Year ranges from 1 to 20 (1 = 1952, 2 = 1954 . . . 20 = 1990). Vote for incumbent and previous incumbent vote are measured as a proportion of the major party vote and range from 0.5 to 1. Change in presidential approval is measured in units of 100. Change in real per capita income is measured in units of $1,000.

Controlling for other factors, U.S. representatives receive 7% more of the vote than challengers without prior office experience. Former senators, governors, and lesser statewide officials all gain 5% more of the vote than inexperienced challengers. Surprisingly, experience in federal office outweighs the advantage of having already represented the entire state. Incumbents challenged by local officials earn 3% less of the vote than against challengers with no prior office. State legislators do only 1% better than inexperienced challengers against incumbents, and this small coefficient fails to even come close to attaining significance at the $p < .05$ level according to $t$-tests.

The impact of challenger quality, as measured by the prior office dummy variables, does not appear to vary significantly over time in senatorial elections. In contrast, Jacobson (1990b) demonstrated that challenger quality has become in-

FIGURE 1
PERCENTAGE OF DEFEATED SENATORS AND REELECTED SENATORS WITH UNDER 55% OF THE MAJOR PARTY VOTE




creasingly valuable in predicting the vote for incumbent House members. He suggested that this change can explain why the average vote margin has increased in House elections, but House members are no more secure in their seats (Jacobson 1990b):

> Measured in votes, the increased value of a high-quality challenge almost matched the increased value of incumbency from the 1950s to the 1970s. This helps explain why, despite wider average vote margins, House seats did not become significantly more secure over these decades. But it indicates that a successful challenge is now far more contingent on local circumstances—on particular candidates and campaigns—than it once was. (57)

If Jacobson's theory that the increase over time in the value of challenger quality explains the increase in the average incumbent vote margin in House elections is correct, then the absence of an increase in the value of challenger quality in Senate elections should be associated with the absence of major change in the average incumbent vote margin for senators.

Senate election data from 1952 through 1990 confirm that this is in fact the case. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of U.S. senators who failed to win reelection or received less than 55% of the major party vote. The correlation between year and percentage of incumbents who lost their reelection bid is –.06. There is a small negative correlation between the year and the percentage of incumbents who

were reelected by margins of less than 10% ($r = -.32$). If anything, the percentage of marginal incumbents slightly declined between 1952 and 1990. In accordance with Jacobson's theory, there is no major change in the average incumbent vote margin for senators.[4]

Except change in real per capita income by state, the coefficients of the local and national political and economic variables are significant and in the predicted direction. Increasing previous incumbent vote by one standard deviation of 11.5% raises incumbent vote by 3.7%. When the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are members of the same political party, the regression equation predicts that a rise of one standard deviation of 5.4 points in presidential approval will cause the vote for the incumbent to increase by 0.5%. However, independent of the effect of changes in presidential approval, incumbents who are members of the president's party receive 5% less of the vote. Similarly, when the senator shares the same party label as the incumbent president, a rise of $200 in national real per capita disposable income results in a gain of 1.8% of the vote for the incumbent senator. The failure of changes in state real per capita disposable income to predict incumbent vote allows me to extend Chubb's (1988) conclusion that the state economy has little direct impact on gubernatorial and state legislative elections to senatorial elections. Incumbent vote declines slightly as population rises. An incumbent in a state with 20 congressional districts should receive about 1% less of the vote than an incumbent in a state with only 10 congressional districts. As Hibbing and Brandes (1983) argue, it is marginally more difficult to gain reelection in more populous states.

## Predicting Challenger Quality

### *Dependent Variable*

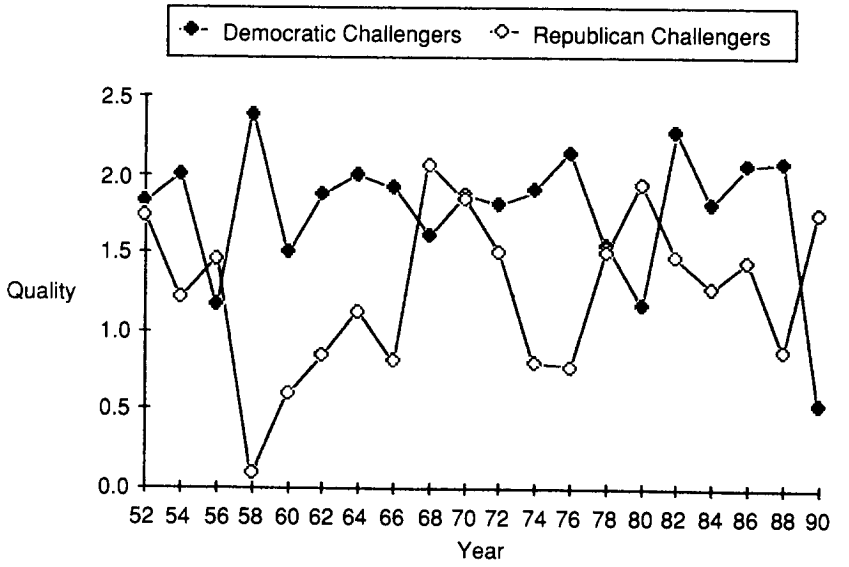
The results presented in model 2 of table 1 allow the construction of a challenger quality scale based upon empirical evidence of the relative value of prior offices. Since members of the House fare best against incumbents, they anchor the top of the scale at 4. Governors, lesser statewide officials, and former senators rank next at 3. While local officials earn a rank of 2, state legislators rank only 1 on the quality scale. Inexperienced challengers occupy the bottom of the scale at 0.[5] Figure 2 reveals the quality of challengers by party over time. Except 1956, 1968,

[4]One other theory could account for the stability of average incumbent vote. Average incumbent vote margin could remain stable if both challenger quality declined and the importance of challenger quality decreased. The fall in importance of challenger quality would counteract the impact of the reduction in challenger quality. However, as figure 2 shows, challenger quality has not declined with time ($r = .28$). Thus, it is safe to conclude that the failure of challenger quality to increase in importance accounts for the lack of change in average incumbent vote.

[5] $T$-tests were conducted on the difference between the coefficients of the prior office dummy variables in the regression of incumbent vote in order to determine whether the difference between any two coefficients was significant enough to warrant the placement of offices at different points on the

FIGURE 2

MEAN CHALLENGER QUALITY BY PARTY




1980, and 1990, the average quality of Democratic challengers exceeded that of Republican challengers. Democrats hold substantially more lower offices than Republicans, so it is not surprising that Democrats usually field higher quality challengers than their Republican opponents.

*Independent Variables*

*Political Conditions.* Both political and economic conditions may influence the quality of Senate challengers. Furthermore, both local and national political and

scale. $t = (b_1 - b_2 / \{SE(b_1) - SE(b_2) + 2[Cov(b_1, b_2)]\}$ The following table shows the probability that the difference between the coefficients of any two variables is not zero.

| | U.S. Rep | Lesser Statewide | Governor | Former Senator | Local Official | State Legislator |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lesser Statewide | >.99 | | | | | |
| Governor | >.99 | >.99 | | | | |
| Former Senator | .92 | .71 | .58 | | | |
| Local Official | >.99 | >.99 | >.99 | .88 | | |
| State Legislator | >.99 | >.99 | >.99 | .97 | >.99 | |
| No Prior Experience | >.99 | >.99 | >.99 | .95 | .98 | .88 |

economic factors may independently affect challenger quality. The proportion of the vote received by the incumbent in the last election will serve as a measure of local political conditions. If potential challengers act strategically, they almost certainly examine the past record of incumbent senators in garnering votes as part of their effort to determine whether or not they have a viable chance of defeating the incumbent (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Jacobson 1989, 1990b; Krasno and Green 1988; Squire 1989).

The difference in presidential approval ratings between the January of the election year and the January of the year before the senatorial election provides an indicator of national political conditions. If the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are different, the change in presidential approval is multiplied by −1. When the party of the president and the incumbent senator are different, large increases in presidential approval should encourage some potential high quality challengers to take the plunge and run against incumbents. The long-term trend in presidential approval is preferable to the actual level of presidential approval because it is a means through which potential candidates can predict future levels of presidential support. While actual levels of presidential approval reveal how the president is doing during one short period, the trend allows candidates to guess how the president will be doing on election day.[6] Whether or not the incumbent shares the party label of the president serves as the second indicator of national political conditions. Incumbents of the president's party may attract stronger challengers regardless of presidential approval because they often have to defend the record of the administration in addition to their own record.

*Economic Conditions.* The increase in real per capita disposable income across the nation between two years before the election and one year before the election will measure national economic conditions (Bianco 1984; Jacobson 1989, 1990b). As with presidential approval, when the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are different, the increase in real per capita disposable income will be multiplied by −1. If real income increases at a high rate, high-quality potential challengers should be discouraged from entering senatorial contests when the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are the same. Similarly, the increase in real per capita income by state provides an estimate of local economic conditions. This variable is multiplied by −1 when the party of the incumbent governor and the incumbent senator are different. Once the fact that voters may reward the party of the incumbent president for his economic performance is taken into account, separate evaluations of the incumbent governor based on the growth of the state economy might be observed.

[6] The change in presidential approval also is superior to the level of presidential approval as a predictor of challenger quality. In calculating presidential approval, the results of all of the Gallup Poll surveys in the appropriate January were averaged to control for errors in the poll. If in a given January, the presidential approval question was asked only once, the results of this poll were averaged with the poll taken nearest to January to calculate presidential approval for that year.

TABLE 2

DETERMINANTS OF CHALLENGER QUALITY, 1952–1990

| Dependent Variable: Challenger Quality | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OLS | | Probit | |
| Independent Variables: | Coefficient | SE | Coefficient | SE |
| Intercept | 3.38 | (.41) | 1.88 | (.33) |
| Previous Incumbent Vote | −3.67 | (.59) | −3.15 | (.49) |
| Change in Presidential Approval | −1.56 | (.65) | −1.03 | (.49) |
| Incumbent of President's Party | .66 | (.23) | .40 | (.17) |
| Change in Real PCI by State | −.48 | (.19) | −.28 | (.14) |
| Change in Real PCI Nationwide | −1.38 | (.54) | −.85 | (.40) |
| Number of Congressional Districts | .009 | (.008) | .007 | (.006) |
| Year | .0002 | (.01) | .004 | (.009) |
| Threshold 1 | | | .48 | (.03) |
| Threshold 2 | | | .72 | (.03) |
| Threshold 3 | | | 1.28 | (.06) |
| Standard Error of the Regression | 1.48 | | | |
| Log Likelihood | | | −708.53 | |
| Number of cases | 496 | | 496 | |

Note: Year ranges from 1 to 20 (1 = 1952, 2 = 1954 . . . 20 = 1990). Vote for incumbent and previous incumbent vote are measured as a proportion of the major party vote and range from 0.5 to 1. Change in presidential approval is measured in units of 100. Change in real per capita income is measured in units of $1,000.

*Population and Time Controls.* The number of congressional districts will be added to the regression as a rough measure of population in order to test whether or not the size of senatorial constituencies affects the quality of senate challengers.[7] Squire (1989) argues that populous states ought to have lower quality challengers. The year of the election serves as an independent variable in order to control for any time trends not measured by the other variables.

*Results*

Columns 1 and 2 of table 2 reveal the results of regressing challenger quality on local and national political and economic variables. Columns 3 and 4 display the results of an ordinal probit analysis of the same variables. Only senatorial constituency size and the year of the election fail to demonstrate a strong relationship to challenger quality. Each of the local and national variables influences the quality

[7]Past research on the impact of constituency size on quality (Squire 1989) and incumbent vote (Hibbing and Brandes 1983) has used the logarithm of the number of CDs or population. In all results presented in this paper, using the logarithm of the number of CDs instead of just the number of CDs makes no difference to the results. I utilize the number of CDs for the sake of simplicity in interpretation.

of senatorial challengers. According to the regression results, raising the vote for the incumbent in the previous election by one standard deviation of 11.5% lowers the quality of the challenger by just over 0.4 points on the quality scale. For incumbent senators, a large reelection margin is good insurance against facing a strong challenger in future elections.

National political conditions, as measured by changes in presidential approval, also strongly influence challenger quality. When the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are the same, an increase of one standard deviation of 7.1 points in presidential approval lowers challenger quality by around 0.1 points. Incumbent senators who share the party label of the president apparently attract stronger challengers. Independent of presidential approval, when the party of the president and the senator are the same, challenger quality increases by about two-thirds of a point on the quality scale. The vulnerability of incumbents of the president's party on the president's record as well as their own may account for why higher quality challengers are more likely to run against incumbents who share the party label of the president.

The regression results indicate that national economic conditions influence challenger quality around 2.9 times as much as state economic conditions. When the party of the incumbent president and the incumbent senator are the same, an increase of around $200 in national real per capita disposable income nationwide causes a decline of just over one-quarter of a point in challenger quality. On the other hand, when the party of the incumbent governor and the incumbent senator are the same, a similar increase in state real per capita disposable income causes a decline of only 0.1 points in challenger quality. When deciding whether or not to challenge an incumbent, potential candidates pay greater attention to national than local conditions.

## Conclusion

Regressing the vote for senatorial incumbents on a set of dummy variables measuring prior office held by the challenger as well as political and economic control variables revealed the relative value of various prior office experience in terms of votes. Despite usually representing smaller constituencies, former members of the House received a greater boost at the polls than former governors and other statewide officials. Several reasonable explanations could account for this seemingly odd result. Running for federal office may be different from campaigning for state office. Federal legislators and state executive officials have quite different responsibilities and often contend with somewhat different types of issues and constituency groups. U.S. representatives may also have greater access to Washington campaign donors based on past contacts. Voters may perceive state and federal offices as requiring different sets of personal and political skills. If these hypotheses are true, the federal experience of members of Congress should advantage them in certain ways over state officials in campaigning for the Senate.

The relative success of representatives as senatorial challengers suggests that both political parties should continue their active efforts to encourage members of the House to run for Senate. Given the relative importance of one senator to one representative and the need for 60 votes to cut off debate in the Senate, risking several House seats in order to potentially gain a greater proportion of Senate seats is a wise investment from a party perspective. Even if an incumbent succeeds in overcoming a strong challenge by a member of the House, a strong challenge weakens the incumbent over the long term by reducing the incumbent's margin of victory. As the analysis of incumbent vote demonstrates, past margins of victory relate directly to future electoral prospects. A small victory margin further endangers an incumbent's reelection indirectly by spurring strong challengers in the future.

Jacobson (1989, 1990b) argues that national political conditions have become less important in directly determining challenger success in House elections over time. While national economic conditions continue to directly affect House election results, the influence of national political forces on challenger success is increasingly mediated through challenger quality. In contrast, quality has not gained in importance relative to national political forces in directly predicting incumbent vote in senatorial elections. Through challenger quality, changes in presidential approval also affect incumbent vote indirectly as well. If these trends continue, the Democrats may expect to maintain their control over the House of Representatives as national political tides rise and fall. The past electoral success of the Democrats helps to ensure their future success because previous incumbent vote is a major influence on both challenger quality and challenger vote. Senatorial elections are not nearly as dissociated from national political trends. If President Clinton's popularity plummets and growth in real per capita income continues to stagnate, Democratic incumbents may find their reelection imperiled. High-quality challengers will come forward to oppose them in this unfavorable electoral climate. The Democrats will discover that their control of the Senate may be harder to sustain if national tides shift to favor the Republicans.

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