

Spring 5-14-2015

The Decline of Marginal Districts in Congressional Elections

Daniel Zimmerman

Chapman University, zimme125@mail.chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zimmerman, Daniel, "The Decline of Marginal Districts in Congressional Elections" (2015). *Student Research Day Abstracts and Posters*. Paper 171.

http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts/171

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Research Day Abstracts and Posters by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.



The Decline of Marginal Districts in Congressional Elections

Dan Zimmerman

Department of Political Science, Chapman University; Orange, California

Introduction to Research

Back in the late 1950's to the early 1970's many political scientists began to notice a decline of competitive elections in many Congressional districts. The phenomenon was first documented by a Yale Professor by the name of David Mayhew when he originally wrote that "the House seat swing is a phenomenon of fast declining amplitude and therefore of fast declining significance" (1974), when he first noticed the enormous number of districts with close House elections had dropped precipitously. This initial discovery led to a long line of further research in an attempt to discover what was causing such low cases of competitive elections and such intense increases in the number of safe districts for Congressional members. Currently there is a multitude of proposed explanations towards this phenomenon including the advantages incumbents have in the reelection process, redistricting/gerrymandering, the impact of recent partisan polarization, the impact of campaign finance, etc. In my investigation I will look at former research done by former and current political scientists to discover what is believed to be causing a decline in marginal districts/competition in congressional elections.

History of the Topic

Political Scientists Alan Abramowitz, Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning came up with three hypotheses to in an attempt to explain the steep decline in marginal districts in congressional elections, the redistricting, partisan polarization, and incumbency hypotheses. The redistricting hypothesis states that declining competition is due mainly to the effects of partisan or bipartisan gerrymandering (basically legislatures are using technology to redraw congressional district lines). If this hypothesis were to be correct, than there should be a substantial increase in the number of safe districts and a decrease in the number of marginal districts in results from the elections in 1982, 1992, and 2002. The partisan polarization hypothesis argues that that the decline is not due to partisan gerrymandering, but simply that Democratic districts have become more Democratic, and Republican districts have become more Republican. The hypothesis also claims that marginal districts are disappearing as a result of powerful forces in American society such as internal migration, immigration, and ideological realignment within the electorate. The incumbency hypothesis states that the decline in competition is due less to change in the partisan composition of House districts than to the growing advantages of the incumbency. The incumbent hold two types of advantages: those that derive from holding office, and campaign-related advantages. Looking at the data, the authors found strong support for both the partisan polarization, and incumbency hypotheses, however very little support for the redistricting hypothesis.

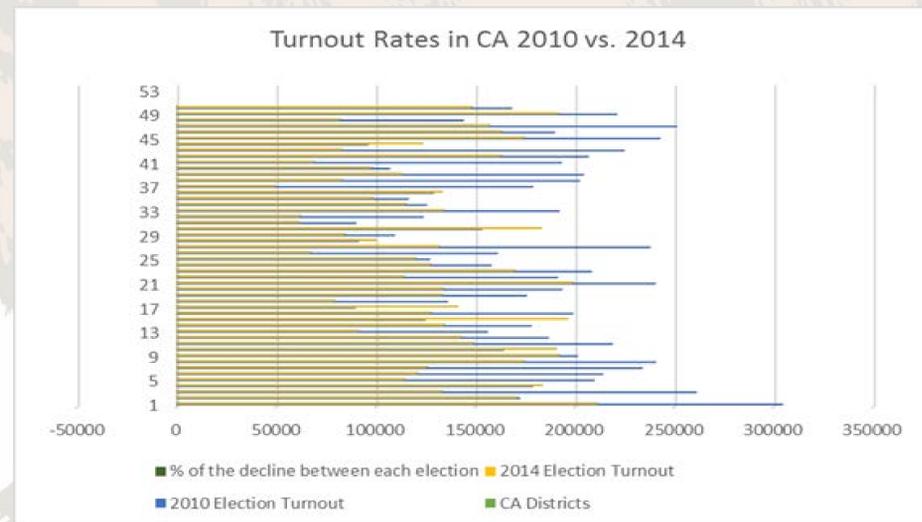
Hypotheses:

H 1: It would seem that the lack of competition could potentially cause a drop in turnout rates.

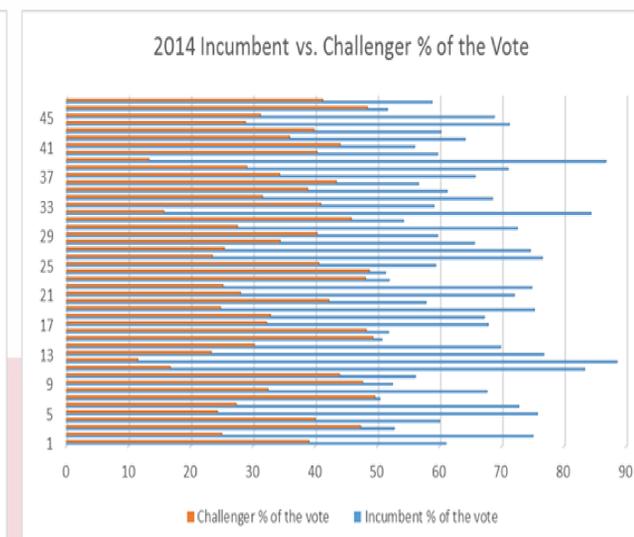
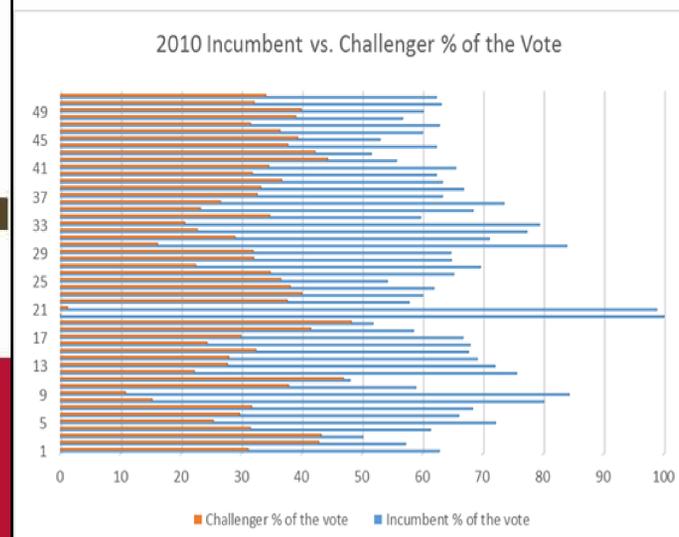
H2: Incumbency advantages is the main reason for the decline in marginal districts in California.

Data

H 1: Turnout Rates: The Chart displays the decline of voter turnout between the 2010 and 2014 congressional elections following the non-partisan redistricting implementation.



H2: Incumbency: The following Tables display the percentage of the vote in races between the incumbent and the challenger in both the 2010 and 2014 CA congressional elections.



Findings

H 1: Turnout Rates:

As expected the data set which came from the California Secretary of State, displayed that in the majority of districts voter turnout plummeted from the 2010 to 2014 congressional elections. It would indicate that the lack of competition in elections has lead voters to stay away from the polls come election day. For instance, District 12 where the Incumbent Nancy Pelosi has been serving since 1987, saw a decline in voter turnout, which could indicate that voters stayed away from the polls due to the lack of competition to challenge incumbent, and the lack of opportunity to make a difference in the total vote.

H 2: Incumbency:

The charts display how disproportionate the percentage of the incumbent vote is compared to that of the challenger. In many districts the data indicates that there is a lack of competition between the incumbent of the challenger, as it indicates there is no real danger for many California Representatives, and that there is currently an extreme amount of safe districts. The data also shows that no incumbent lost a race in both the 2010 and 2014 congressional elections, thus showing the immense advantages the incumbent has in re-securing their district.

Conclusions

In the case of the decline in marginal districts in both California and the rest of the United States it would seem that both the impact of partisan polarization and the extreme advantages held by the incumbent have made way for an all time high of safe districts across the nation. There are many explanations to why the incumbents yields so many advantages including the ability to fund and run a better campaign and the perks of already serving in office. Based on these current trends it would seem that the number of safe districts will remain high in congressional elections and there will remain a lack of true competition for incumbents.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan I. "Incumbency, Campaign Spending, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *The Journal of Politics*, 53, pp 34-56. doi:10.2307/2131719.
- Abramowitz, Alan I. "Partisan Redistricting and the 1992 Congressional Elections." *Journal of Politics*, By Richard G. Niemi. 3rd ed. Vol. 56. N.p.; U of Chicago, 1994. 811-17. Print.
- Alan Gerber (1998). "Estimating the Effect of Campaign Spending on Senate Election Outcomes Using Instrumental Variables." *American Political Science Review*, 92, pp 401-411. doi:10.2307/2585672.
- Campbell, James E. "The Stagnation of Congressional Elections." (2003): 141-58. Buffalo.edu. Web. 27 Mar. 2015.
- Costrell, JB. "The Effects Of Non-Legislative Approaches To Redistricting On Competition In Congressional Elections." *Polity* 44.1 (n.d.): 32-50. Social Sciences Citation Index. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.
- DeVault, James. "Political Polarization, Congressional Redistricting, And Trade Liberalization." *Public Choice* 157.1/2 (2013): 207-221. Business Source Premier. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.
- Helft, Miguel. "California." - Election Results 2010. *New York Times*, Nov. 2010. Web. 01 Apr. 2015.
- Mayhew, David R. "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals." *Polity* 1974: 295. JSTOR Journals. Web. 1 Apr. 2015.
- Parker, Glenn R. "The Advantages of Incumbency in House Elections." *American Politics Research*. 4th ed. Vol. 8. N.p.; n.p., 1980. 449-64. Print.