CANARIES IN A COAL MINE: ARE OPEN SEAT AND CONGRESSIONAL SPECIAL ELECTIONS INDICATIVE OF NATIONAL PARTISAN TIDES?

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Government

By

Seth W. Petersen, M.A.

Washington, DC
August 25, 2010
CANARIES IN A COAL MINE: ARE OPEN SEAT AND CONGRESSIONAL SPECIAL ELECTIONS INDICATIVE OF NATIONAL PARTISAN TIDES?

Seth W. Petersen, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: Stephen J. Wayne, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses whether the outcomes of open seat and congressional special elections are more indicative of local factors or national partisan tides within the electorate. While political pundits often imbue electoral outcomes with national significance, academic explanations of open seat and congressional special elections stress the importance of candidate resources and district demographics in deciding the contests. Pitting the conventional wisdom as presented by the national media against the candidate-constituency model advanced in the political science literature, this dissertation investigates, and assesses the accuracy of, the divergent interpretations of open seat and congressional special elections presented by political pundits in the national media and political scientists. Using OLS regression to analyze all open seat and congressional special elections from 1977-2008 this dissertation concludes that while open seat elections may reflect referenda effects against the incumbent president’s party, national factors are only directly decisive if the open seat election is close and presidential approval or the policy mood of the electorate shifts drastically. On the other hand, congressional special elections are decidedly local affairs affected by candidate spending and the percent Hispanic residing in the district. Further analysis also uncovered that congressional special elections were not unique from open seat
elections. Hence, this dissertation concluded any differences between open seat and congressional special elections were largely a product of “strategic politicians” and the national media’s ability to prime national concerns through the increased publicity that accompanies open seat elections, but not congressional special elections. In sum, this research determined the largely local nature of open seat and congressional special elections. Although pundits can correctly paint open seat elections as reflecting referenda effects, the remainder of the conventional wisdom as portrayed by the national media is largely incorrect. This research also lends clarity to the previously disparate findings presented within the scarce scholarly research devoted to congressional special elections and moves academia one step closer to a consensus regarding the local nature of congressional special election contests. The implications of this research for potential candidates, American political parties, and American democracy are discussed in the conclusion.
This dissertation was only made possible due to the encouragement and constructive feedback of my committee, Dr. Stephen J. Wayne, Dr. Jim Lengle, and Dr. Jonathan M. Ladd. Their wisdom and insight provided much needed focus, and their wit made the task of writing, and rewriting the dissertation several times, seem not so bad. I am deeply indebted to my close friends and colleagues J. Furman Daniel III and Elliott Fullmer as well. The endless hours they spent reading and commenting on numerous drafts of chapters is hopefully reflected in the final product. However, any errors are of course, my own. A special thanks also goes out to my family for their love and support throughout my academic career. The sacrifices they made and the encouragement they provided is immeasurable, and will never be forgotten. Thanks for believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. I could never repay all you guys have done for me. I am also extremely thankful for my friends who kept me grounded though the process and provided advice along the way. Graduate school would have been much more difficult without the insights they shared over numerous cigars or the levity they provided when it all seemed too much at times. Frederick Douglass famously said, “If there is no struggle there is no progress.” My friends ensured my progress toward the Ph.D. by enabling me to forget about the struggles I encountered throughout graduate school. For that I am eternally grateful. Finally, to my mother Joan Ross, do not worry, when I get where I am going, I will remember where I came from.

Many thanks,
Seth W. Petersen
# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction and Past Research ................................................................. 1

Chapter Two: My Model .................................................................................................. 38

Chapter Three: Open To Interpretation: The Importance of Local Factors and National Partisan Tides in Open Seat Elections ................................................................. 58

Chapter Four: Special Circumstances? : Discovering the Determinants of Congressional Special Elections ........................................................................................................ 95

Chapter Five: Final Thoughts ......................................................................................... 140

Appendix .......................................................................................................................... 168

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 172
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1 Congressional Approval Rating and Reelection Rates, 1978-2008............... 3
Figure 3.1 Average Oct. Presidential Approval by Election Year, 1978-2008............. 85
Figure 3.2 Policy Mood by Election Year, 1978-2008............................................. 87
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Main Sources for National and Local News by Age........................................... 6
Table 1.2 Cable News Source by Partisan ID ................................................................. 7
Table 3.1 Average Candidate Spending by Party in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008 . 60
Table 3.2 Candidate Experience by Party and Office, 1978-2008................................. 61
Table 3.3 Black Population and GOP Open Seat Electoral Success, 1978-2008 .......... 62
Table 3.4 Normal Vote in District and GOP Open Seat Electoral Success, 1978-2008 65
Table 3.5 Catch Me if You Can: GOP Open Seat Electoral Success and the Presidential Vote, 1978-2008 ................................................................................................. 71
Table 3.6 Partisan Turnover by Party and President in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008 74
Table 3.7 President's Party's Performance in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008......... 77
Table 3.8 Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008 ......................................................................................................................... 81
Table 4.1 Average Candidate Spending by Party in Special Elections, 1977-2008 ..... 99
Table 4.2 Cause of Vacancy by Election, 1977-2008.................................................... 100
Table 4.3 Candidate Experience by Party and Office, 1977-2008.............................. 101
Table 4.4 Black Population and Republican Special Election Electoral Success, 1977- 2008............................................................................................................................ 102
Table 4.5 Normal Vote in District and GOP Special Election Electoral Success, 1977- 2008 .......................................................................................................................... 103
Table 4.6 Catch Me if You Can: GOP Special Election Electoral Success and the Presidential Vote, 1977-2008 ........................................................................................................ 105
Table 4.7 Partisan Turnover by Party and President in Special Elections, 1977-2008 107
Table 4.8 President's Party's Performance in Special Elections, 1977-2008............ 110
Table 4.9 Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections, 1977-2008......................................................................................................................... 116

Table 4.10 Regression Estimates of Republican Presidential Candidate’s Vote Share via Special Elections, 1977-2008 ................................................................. 133

Table 3.8b Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Open Seat Elections Using Gaddie’s Spending Measure, 1978-2008...................................................... 168

Table 4.8b President’s Party’s Performance in Special Elections Including Approval, 1977-2008............................................................................................................. 169

Table 4.9b Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections Using Gaddie’s Spending Measure, 1977-2008............................................................... 170

Table 4.9c Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections, 1977-2008 Using Actual Presidential Approval and Interaction Terms .................... 171
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND PAST RESEARCH

1.1 Question

This dissertation addresses one main question: Are the outcomes of congressional special elections, and their closest counterparts, open seat elections, more indicative of national partisan tides within the electorate; or are the outcomes the result of local factors within the constituencies?

Although political pundits are quick to imbue open seat and congressional special election outcomes with national significance, academic explanations of these elections stress the importance of candidate resources and district demographics in deciding the contests. Pitting the conventional wisdom presented by national media outlets against the candidate-constituency model advanced in the political science literature, this dissertation investigates, and assesses the accuracy of, the divergent interpretations of open seat and congressional special elections presented by media pundits and political scientists.¹

Two goals drive the analysis: First, to uncover whether open seat and congressional special elections are decidedly local or national affairs and compare the results of the analysis to the conventional wisdom surrounding the national significance attributed to open seat and congressional special election outcomes. Second, this study tests whether open seat and congressional special elections are similarly explained by the candidate-constituency model that dominates congressional elections research, ultimately

¹ For purposes of this project “media” refers to national media outlets such as national newspapers, the major networks, and cable news channels such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.
uncovering whether congressional special elections are indeed special when compared against open seat elections.

1.2 Introduction

Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill famously said, “all politics is local.” If representatives are single-minded seekers of reelection as Mayhew assumes, many aspects of a representative’s career should be dictated by their constituency. The issues representatives advocate, the committees they chair, and even a congressman’s campaign style are designed to demonstrate their ability to bring home the bacon and provide a rationale for their reelection. Figure 1.1 below illustrates that from 1978-2008 the overwhelming majority of representatives have been successful in this endeavor and have been rewarded with reelection.

---

4 Congressional reelection rates from 1978-2008 were obtained from the Center For Responsive Politics. This information can be obtained at [http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/reelect.php](http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/reelect.php) (accessed April 14th, 2010). For congressional approval ratings, the latest Gallup poll prior to the election year was used. This data can be obtained at [http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx#1](http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx#1) (accessed April 14th, 2010).
However, Figure 1.1 also displays a disconnection between congressional reelection rates and the overall approval rating of Congress. In November 1992, eighty-eight percent of representatives were reelected. Conversely, only eighteen percent of the public approved of the way Congress was handling its job when asked in a March 1992 poll.\(^5\) This discrepancy suggests that constituents adore their individual representative, but abhor the national institution in which they serve.

\(^5\) Data obtained from [http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx#1](http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx#1) (accessed July 11\(^{\text{th}},\) 2010). Though *Gallup* only reported congressional approval one time in 1992, the average congressional approval from July 1991-November 1993 was only 27 percent (seven polls were conducted over this time period).
There are many explanations for this phenomenon known as the Fenno Paradox. While Congress is judged primarily on its legislative output and ability to address current problems, the shared powers within our constitutional system, and the myriad of committees within Congress itself, makes expedient congressional action nearly impossible.

Couple this element of deliberate design by the founding fathers with the national media’s depiction of Congress as a gridlocked institution full of conflict, scandal, and corruption, and the picture becomes clearer.

Constituents can turn on the local news and see their representative at a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new plant that will bring jobs to the area. Or they can identify with him as he throws out the first pitch at a Little League game. Constituents can see tangible local benefits, while simultaneously detesting that distant place called Washington.

Although the design of our democratic system and divergent depictions of the institution of Congress as compared to its individual members by the national and local media partially explain the Fenno Paradox, the incumbency factor also explains the astronomical reelection rate in Congress.

Congressional incumbents are endowed with institutional advantages when running for reelection. Incumbents possess ready made lists of donors to fund their reelection campaigns, they are allotted a number of free trips home to explain their

6 Fenno, *Home Style.*
accomplishments, and they possess the franking privilege; enabling representatives to disseminate campaign materials through the mail at no personal cost. If an incumbent utilizes these benefits effectively, they are usually assured of a lengthy tenure in Congress. When the member finally retires and returns home, their name may adorn the local post office, high school, or highway in recognition of their unquestioned commitment to the district.

This project investigates whether open seat and congressional special elections (congressional races without an incumbent), possess the same local dynamics that often decide congressional reelection campaigns. With no incumbent for the constituency to identify with, are open seat and congressional special elections races more influenced by national factors? The conventional wisdom presented by the national media concerning open seat and congressional special elections would suggest these races are influenced by national factors.

1.3 Conventional Wisdom

This dissertation challenges the conventional wisdom. Generally speaking, the term “conventional wisdom” refers to the widely accepted truth of an idea. Therefore, any investigation into the conventional wisdom on a subject requires two tasks: First, discovering what the “truths” on that subject are; and second: understanding what institution has been empowered to disseminate such “truths” to the wider public.

The mass media is the primary purveyor of political information to the American public. According to the Pew Research Center’s biennial media attitudes survey conducted July 22-26, 2009, “[t]he vast majority of Americans (71 percent) continue to
cite television as their source for most national and international news.”

Table 1.1 breaks down the dominant source for national, international, and local news by age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Source for…</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>18-29</th>
<th>30-49</th>
<th>50-64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl and Intl News</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local News</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1506</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While television is the dominant source of national news across all age groups, respondents under the age of fifty also cited the internet as a major source of national and international news. In contrast, respondents over fifty years of age cited newspapers as a major source of national and international news.

The generational divide can be explained by the dominate media of a particular generation. Those over sixty-five years-old grew up in an age of newspapers. Television had yet to emerge as a dominate media; newspapers were the main source for information. Conversely, those under thirty were born into a world of video games, cellular phones, and personal computers. With technology encroaching upon every aspect of their daily life, the younger generation’s reliance on, and comfort with, the internet is understandable.

---


8 Ibid.
Interestingly, while only the elderly rely on newspapers for national and international news, newspapers figure more prominently in the propagation of local news. Although television is still the dominant source for local news across all segments of society, newspapers are mentioned more frequently than the internet as another source for local news. Even those ages 18-29 claim they get more local news from newspapers (39 percent) than from the internet (21 percent).

Television is the dominant source for international, national, and even local news among all segments of society. However, which network a constituent gravitates towards to obtain political information is a decision dictated by their political beliefs. Put simply, viewers watch the networks that affirm, not inform their political judgments.

Table 1.2 presents these findings.\(^9\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natl and Intl News</td>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Republican       | 31       | 26        | 28        | 34        |
| Democrat         | 17       | 11        | 11        | 10        |
| Independent      | 21       | 14        | 16        | 19        |

| CNN              |          |           |           |           |
| Total            | 27       | 18        | 16        | 22        |

| Republican       | 26       | 15        | 13        | 13        |
| Democrat         | 32       | 21        | 21        | 29        |
| Independent      | 24       | 18        | 14        | 20        |

\(^9\) Ibid.
Table 1.2 highlights two points about cable news and the audience it attracts. First, more Republicans opt to watch *Fox News*, and more Democrats prefer *CNN*. Second, the ideological gulf between the respective audiences has widened since 2003.

In 2003, fourteen percent more Republicans tuned into *Fox News* than Democrats; by 2009 the gap grew to twenty-four percent. Similarly, *CNN* attracted six percent more Democrats than Republicans in 2003. By 2009, the gap increased to sixteen percent. Cable news enables viewers to easily obtain political information with which they agree.

The vast array of information, the ease at which it is available, and the ability of the consumer to change the channel has also altered the way political news is presented. News stories must be new, interesting, and captivating; enthralling the audience and expanding the networks influence while enlarging its profits. To grab audience attention, news coverage emphasizes political conflict rather than consensus, personality over policy, and action versus inaction. Politics is painted as an epic tug-of-war between opposing forces. Tenuous alliances are forged and forgotten, speeches embolden supporters or enrage opponents, and one party emerges victorious while the other retreats to lick its wounds. Motivated by profit margins, media storylines must entertain.

If the national media’s only role was to entertain its audience (which is particularly true of cable news networks), its sensational presentation of politics for the sake of profit would be of little concern; however, the national media also informs individuals; fitting the pieces of the political puzzle together for its viewers and placing the political
events of the day within a broader storyline. Hence, the national media’s influence rests on the ability to frame issues and set the agenda—telling people not what to think, but what to think about—when rendering political judgments.

If the national media’s penchant for profit, and therefore, entertainment, is the prime concern in the construction of storylines, the conventional wisdom obtained from the media’s presentation or interpretation of politics deserves scrutiny. The national media may be empowered to disseminate the accepted “truths” regarding open seat and congressional special elections to the public, but the institutional routines of the media, its criteria governing “newsworthiness,” and the primacy of profit casts suspicion on validity of these interpretations.

Political pundits commonly attribute national significance to open seat and congressional special election outcomes. Routinely viewed as reflecting referenda on presidential performance, the foreshadowing of the electorate’s emerging policy concerns, or as harbingers of future electoral fortunes, open seat and congressional special election outcomes are interpreted by media personalities as indicators of

---

12 For a discussion of how news stories are selected and crafted around the production values of the news organization, their criteria of newsworthiness, and the need to entertain an audience for the sake of profit see Doris A Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 8th ed. (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010).
13 For this project the term “pundits” refers to media personalities such as Chris Matthews, Keith Olbermann, and the political professionals and commentators that regularly join them on their cable news programs.
national electoral trends. Some scholarly research also supports the idea that national conditions influence electoral outcomes.

Noted political scientist Gary Jacobson writes, “[In open seats]…When incumbency is not a factor, local partisan habits and national politics do more to shape campaigns and therefore election results. Party affiliation, national tides, and presidential coattails become a bigger part of the story.”

Pundits, possibly informed by the scholarly literature, have some factual footing to support their assertions about the national flavor of open seat races.

However, a similar body of scholarly literature on congressional special elections does not exist. Research on congressional special elections is surprisingly scant. Therefore, the national media’s interpretation of the meaning of a congressional special election result should be greeted with skepticism. If scholars do not fully understand the dynamics of these infrequent congressional contests, how can political pundits on cable networks reliably interpret their meaning?

While the historical congressional special election contests discussed below may have given rise to the conventional wisdom that special election outcomes reflect referenda, represent emerging policy concerns, or foretell electoral fortunes, the national nature of these contests is uncertain. The national media’s search for profit, more sensational storylines, and need to comment on wider national conditions, may motivate pundits to portray seemingly local congressional special elections in terms of

---

their national significance despite the actual dynamics of the congressional special election. Some congressional special elections that demonstrate the current conventional wisdom surrounding their interpretation are presented below.

1.3.1 Policy Referendum

A great example of how a special election was perceived as a barometer of national politics occurred in 1937 in Texas’ Twelfth Congressional District. The incumbent, James Buchanan died suddenly in the summer of 1937. In the great tradition of widow succession, many assumed Buchanan’s wife would fill the seat and run unopposed. Before Mrs. Buchanan could announce her intention to seek the seat, Lyndon Johnson, then the director of the Texas Youth Administration, and seven other candidates tossed their hat into the ring; crowding the aggrieved widow out of the contest.

In his conversations with Doris Kearns Goodwin, LJB disclosed that his decision to enter the race to represent the Texas Twelfth was made immediately after reading of Buchanan’s death in a newspaper left on a park bench in Houston:

[LBJ] kept thinking this was my district and my chance.

The day seemed endless. [Johnson’s visitor] never stopped talking. And I had to pretend total interest in everything we were seeing and doing. There were times when I thought I’d explode from all the excitement

---

bottled up inside....As soon as I got home I talked with
Bird [Lady Bird Johnson] and then I called Senator
Wirtz.\textsuperscript{16}

Soon after talking it over, Johnson secured a $10,000 loan from his father-in-law to
get his campaign off the ground. A week after Buchanan’s funeral Johnson officially
announced his candidacy for Congress. The former staffer’s political career was
beginning to take shape.

As the campaign commenced, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s court packing
scheme became a significant issue. The continuation of Roosevelt’s New Deal
initiatives rested in part on a friendly court, which in turn needed to be endorsed by the
electorate.

Johnson was advised to support the scheme, co-opting Roosevelt’s popularity and
simultaneously separating himself from the pack of candidates that opposed the court
packing plan. Heeding the advice, Johnson supported the scheme to pack the court and
berated his opponents as enemies of the president. Despite the fact that four of his
opponents later endorsed the plan, their commitment came too late; Johnson emerged
victorious.

President Roosevelt, in turn took Johnson’s support for the plan and his subsequent
election to Congress, as an endorsement of his proposal by the electorate. Johnson’s
victory was portrayed by the press as an endorsement of FDR’s Second New Deal.

\textsuperscript{16} Doris Kearns, \textit{Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1976), 86.
Though Roosevelt’s court packing scheme failed, this historic congressional special election was interpreted both by the press and President Roosevelt as a referendum in support of a political policy.\(^\text{17}\)

The Massachusetts Senate race in 2010 was also seen by many pundits as a referendum on presidential policy initiatives. With the death of Democrat Ted Kennedy on August 25\(^\text{th}\), 2009, the Senate seat he held for forty-seven years was left vacant. As a member of America’s most prominent political dynasty, the passing of a Kennedy was sure to breed media attention.

While Ted Kennedy’s death may have signified the end of political era, it also occurred amidst a debate about President Barack Obama’s plan to overhaul the American healthcare system, an issue Ted Kennedy tirelessly advocated for as chair of the Senate’s Health Education Labor and Pensions Committee. Able to tie the passing of a prominent politician to a timely policy debate, the media storyline was set: Republican Scott Brown’s victory over Democrat Martha Coakley represented a repudiation of President Obama’s healthcare reform legislation by the electorate.\(^\text{18}\)

While special elections can be interpreted as the electorate’s acceptance or rejection of national policy, special elections can also represent the \textit{emergence} of policy concerns. This interpretation was offered in 1991-1992 when Democrat Harris Wofford

\(^{17}\) This account came from Ronald K. Gaddie and Charles S. Bullock, \textit{Elections to Open Seats in the U.S. House: Where the Action Is} (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000), 150-51. As the author notes, not only were national and local politics on the same wavelength, but after the 1937 congressional special election the Supreme Court was more supportive of President Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation, indicating the referendum strategy may have worked.\(^\text{18}\) Karen Tumulty, “Does Brown’s Senate Win Mean the End of Health Reform?” \textit{Time}, January 20\(^\text{th}\), 2010.\(^\text{http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1954980,00.html}\) (accessed July 11\(^\text{th}\), 2010).
rode the hot button issue of healthcare to victory in the 1991 Pennsylvania special
election called to fill the Senate seat left vacant by the death of Republican John Heinz.
A year later, presidential candidate Bill Clinton followed Wofford’s lead of promising
affordable medical care.

As the above examples illustrate, special election outcomes may be influenced by
national policy. Voters can accept or reject presidential initiatives, or special election
outcomes may signal the emergence of policy concerns within a constituency. On the
other hand, asserting these relationships does not prove them. Without the existence of
detailed exit poll data, the exact determinants of a constituent’s vote cannot be known
for certain.

If it could be shown that the competing candidates held divergent views on matters
of national policy, and the constituents recognized these differing policy positions, exit
polls would have to indicate that constituents cast their vote on the basis of these policy
positions alone to accept the conventional wisdom that congressional special election
outcomes represent referenda effects on presidential policy.\(^1\) Until such evidence can
be presented, the interpretation that congressional special election outcomes represent
referenda regarding national policy remains open to investigation.

With slim majorities in the House and Senate, congressional special election
outcomes may affect national policy, especially in an age of political polarization. Scott
Brown’s election in January 2010 led pundits to ponder the fate of President Obama’s

\(^1\) For a discussion of an electorate voting on the basis of distinct differences in policy see Austin Ranney,
_The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government: It’s Origins and Present State_ (Urbana-Champaign:
healthcare reform legislation. As the possible 41st vote in the Senate, Brown’s election would deny Democrats the ability to pass legislation on a strictly partisan basis.

Hence, it is conceivable to say congressional special election outcomes may affect national policies. However, proving congressional special election outcomes were affected by national policies is another matter.

While the votes of a newly elected member of Congress can be tracked, and the member’s overall affect on legislation can be determined, the reasons constituents support a candidate may be difficult to determine, and cannot be said to rest on policy grounds alone without the existence of exit poll data. The media seemingly reverses the causal relationship: congressional special election outcomes may not represent referenda effects on presidential policy, but may affect national policy; particularly in an age of heightened partisan polarization.

1.3.2 Bellwethers

Occasionally, the media also interprets special election outcomes as electoral bellwethers. In this scenario, electoral outcomes signal a tsunami of support or foretell electoral misfortune for the incumbent president’s party in the coming election cycle. Like a soothsayer reading tea-leaves, the media employs the bellwether frame to comment on coming national trends. This interpretation was offered in 1993-1994 and again in 2008 during the presidency of George W. Bush.

The best known of these cases is the special Texas U.S. Senate election in early 1993, where appointed Senator Bob Krueger was beaten handily in a special runoff election by GOP challenger Kay Bailey Hutchinson. In May 1994, the Republican Party
continued its run, scoring an upset in Kentucky’s Second District, a seat held by William Natcher for twenty-one terms prior to his death.

William Natcher was initially elected via a congressional special election in 1953 and never missed a roll-call vote until he was hospitalized in the month prior to his death. Even at age eighty-three, Natcher performed his own research and recorded all his activities in a journal. His low-cost homespun campaigns were paid for out of pocket, and usually consisted of visiting courthouse towns on the weekends. Despite archaic tactics, Natcher routinely rolled up convincing margins at the polls.

Selected by state party caucus, the Democratic Party nominated Joe Prather, a well-known and influential State Senator to follow in Natcher’s footsteps. The GOP nominated Tom Lewis, a fundamentalist minister viewed by many as a sacrificial lamb. The Republican Party seemed to be conceding the seat to the Democrats.

Although largely unnoticed, the Second District was changing. For most of Natcher’s tenure, the district centered on the traditionally Democratic towns of Owensboro and Bowling Green; however, following reapportionment, Kentucky lost a district and the Second District was redrawn to include Republican leaning areas such as Louisville. Though Natcher held the district through his well established home style, the new district boundaries crept into three television markets. Since Prather lacked the name recognition enjoyed by a twenty-one term incumbent, a change in campaign style would be necessary.

This lesson was lost on the Democratic nominee. Joe Prather campaigned for Congress much as he had for the state legislature, traveling around and meeting
constituents, opting not to spend money on consultants or media. Conversely, Tom Lewis advertised heavily on Louisville television. Lewis ran commercials that showed the Democratic nominee “morphing” in President Clinton, insinuating Prather supported Clinton’s policies. Despite running away from the Democratic Party and the president, Prather lost. Tom Lewis, an early underdog, won decisively capturing fifty-five percent of the vote.

Democratic Party professionals blamed Prather’s loss on his inability to conduct a modern campaign. Republicans, having never represented Kentucky’s Second District, took the victory as a sign of good things to come in the 1994 midterm elections, and the media agreed. The media portrayed the Democratic losses in Oklahoma and Kentucky as a sign of the, “Democrats’ vulnerability in this fall’s midterm elections and could foreshadow significant Republican gains in the South.”

Kay Bailey Hutchinson’s win in Texas, and Lewis’ upset in Kentucky were not the only victories that provided the Republican Party with electoral enthusiasm. Three weeks after President Clinton’s election, Georgia voters ousted one term Senator Wyche Fowler in a runoff election in favor of a Republican. Oklahoma voters also opted to send Frank Lucas, a favorite of the Christian Coalition to Congress following the retirement of Glenn English, a Democrat who represented the district for nineteen years prior to his retirement. In Wisconsin, Democrat Peter Barca held the seat vacated by Les Aspin, the newly appointed Secretary of Defense, by a razor thin margin.

This series of electoral surprises signaled a conservative wave was gathering strength within the national electorate as early as May 1994, and the media echoed these sentiments. *The Boston Globe* reported; “So far there have been just two races [Oklahoma and Kentucky]. But if you add in the two special elections in the Senate that went to Republicans [Texas and Georgia], the tea leaves so far have been reading GOP.”\(^{21}\) A sentiment brought to fruition with the 1994 “Republican Revolution.”\(^{22}\)

In 2008 the roles were reversed, and Democrats reaped the rewards. A national wave of discontent swept over the electorate, signaling good things to come in the upcoming general election.

As George W. Bush’s presidency progressed from 2006-2008 a series of events tarnished the image of the Republican Party. America was involved in a protracted and increasingly unpopular war in the Middle East, and a series of scandals shook the party of family values to the core. As if a cloud of corruption hanging over Washington was not enough, the American economy was on the brink of collapse. Collective discontent left many voters anxious for change in 2008.

In 2008 three Democratic congressional special election victories in once staunchly Republican districts demonstrated the electorate’s discontent with the Republican Party (IL-14\(^{th}\), LA-6\(^{th}\), and MS-1\(^{st}\)). Furthermore, since the GOP attempted, and failed, to nationalize the congressional special elections by linking the Democratic congressional candidates to presidential hopeful Barack Obama through advertising, the media saw


\(^{22}\) Accounts of these elections came from Gaddie and Bullock, *Elections to Open Seats*, 151-53.
the congressional special election results as indicative of the upcoming 2008 presidential election. CNN reported the results as, “yet another rejection of the House Republican agenda, the Bush administration's misguided policies and John McCain's campaign for a third Bush term.”23 According to CNN, “the Mississippi result suggested [Obama’s] name would not scare away voters in conservative districts.”24

Sensing the national implications of these electoral upsets Representative Tom Davis (R-VA), the former leader of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee (RCCC), circulated a memorandum claiming, “[These elections] are canaries in the coal mine, warning of far greater losses in the fall, if steps are not taken to remedy the current climate...The political atmosphere facing House Republicans this November is the worst since Watergate and is far more toxic than it was in 2006.”25 Mr. Davis fears were well founded. In 2008 voters gave control of Congress back to the Democrats and elected Democrat Barack Obama to the presidency. Change was on the horizon.

These vignettes of electoral victory presented above paint a picture of a frustrated electorate. However, it’s also important to understand how the media conveys the emotions of the electorate. While the bellwether frame is more abstract, and particularly

24 Ibid.
powerful if electoral upsets happen in succession, the accuracy of the policy referenda frame requires that citizens act on the basis of policy positions alone.

This section describes the media’s role in framing electoral outcomes. As the primary purveyor of political information, the media’s role in informing individuals and shaping the electorates judgment is important. Motivated by profit, the media seeks sensational, exciting, stories riddled with conflict and surprise, and employs broad frames allowing pundits to comment on the stories national impact.

Having discussed the popular frames and their flaws, the next section outlines the political science literature concerning the determinants of open seat and congressional special elections, drawing out points of concurrence and contention between the conventional wisdom and the political science literature.

1.4 Congressional Special Elections

Congressional special elections are an understudied political phenomenon. Only a handful of studies exist. As Sigelman notes,

In the midst of all the attention that has been lavished on off-year House elections, a type of House election that is even less visible remains virtually ignored. This is the special election, so named because it is specially called to fill a vacancy. One looks in vain through scholarly articles on Congress and elections, and even through basic textbooks and reference works, for even the barest
mention of, let alone the most fundamental descriptive
information about, special elections.²⁶

This glaring gap in the literature is thought to exist due to the unsystematic nature,
and unsynchronized timing of special elections. Since congressional special elections
occur in effective isolation, they are thought to have no predictive value.²⁷ Yet, the
conventional wisdom suggests congressional special election outcomes are viewed as
predictive by the media. Pundits frame congressional special election outcomes as
reflecting referenda effects or as electoral bellwethers. However, the degree to which
congressional special election outcomes are influenced by national tides is an open
question and the subject of this work.

While congressional special elections may be an understudied aspect in American
government, their occurrence was not unanticipated by the founding fathers. Article 1, §
2 of the United States Constitution dictates how vacancies in the House of
Representatives are to be handled: “When vacancies happen in the Representation from
any State, the Executive Authority thereof shall issue Writs of Election to fill such
Vacancies.”²⁸ Congressional special election procedures were deemed an issue for
individual states and their executives, to decide. This process is in line with the
founders’ wider decision to let the states determine which citizens were initially eligible
to vote.

²⁶ Lee Sigelman, “Special Elections to the U.S. House: Some Descriptive Generalizations,” Legislative
²⁷ Donley T. Studlar and Lee Sigelman, “Special Elections: A Comparative Prospective,” British Journal
²⁸ U.S. Constitution, art. 1, sec. 2, clause 4.
The fact that citizens must vote in congressional special elections for the House, and Senate vacancies are filled via gubernatorial appointment proposes a natural limit to this project as well.

Given the power of the Governor to fill Senate vacancies, this study is only concerned with congressional special elections for the House of Representatives. The questionable behavior of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich in filling Barack Obama’s Senate seat upon his winning the presidency in 2008 raises concerns regarding the democratic nature of Senate appointments. The six year term of Senators, as opposed to the election of Representatives every two years, may also alter the electoral calculations of Senators compared to Representatives.

In the first study of congressional special elections Sigelman examined 97 “true” congressional special elections, defined as congressional special elections that do not coincide with a general election, spanning 1954-1978, and concluded these events were referenda on the sitting president. Descriptive statistics revealed that, “the frequency of party turnover in special elections (21.3%) is approximately three times the party

29 There are important differences between the House and Senate regarding the official process of succession when a vacancy occurs. The process of succession in the Senate is different, guided by the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, which states: “When vacancies happen in the representation of any State in the Senate, the executive Authority of such State shall issue writs of election to fill such vacancies: Provided, That the legislature of any State may empower the executive thereof to make temporary appointments until the people fill the vacancies by election as the legislature may direct.” For a vacancy in the Senate then, the Governor appoints a replacement, who then must stand for election at the next regularly scheduled election. Presently, 45 states allow for gubernatorial appointment, while only 3 states (MA, OR, and WI) require special elections to fill Senate vacancies. In Oklahoma, the governor can only appoint the winner of the special election to fill the balance of the term. Lastly, the status of the statute in Alaska remains unclear. In Alaska, a statute adopted by the legislature in 2004 authorized the governor to make a temporary appointment until a special election can be held 60-90 days after the vacancy. However, in a referendum passed by the voters, a law was adopted that took effect the same day as the legislative enactment, calling for a special election between 60 and 90 days after the Senate vacancy but without authorizing the governor to make a temporary appointment.
turnover rate in general House elections (7.5%).\textsuperscript{30} The difference in partisan turnover prompted Sigelman to generalize, “Party control of House seats changes much more rapidly in special elections than in general elections. When party control of a House seat does change hands, the president’s party suffers almost as much in special elections as it does in midterm elections, and vastly more in both special and midterm elections than in on-year elections.”\textsuperscript{31} This finding is not surprising since the power of incumbency is muted in open seat and congressional special elections.

However, a follow up study by Studlar and Sigelman comparing U.S. congressional special elections to their British equivalent, by-elections (the term used for special elections in Britain), found congressional special election results to be manifestations of normal partisan forces. The authors found, “each increment of 1 percent in the presidential party’s share of the votes in the preceding general election has increased the party’s predicted share of the special election votes by 0.45 percent.”\textsuperscript{32}

Feigert and Norris examined the relationship between congressional special election outcomes and approval of the national government in four English speaking democracies (the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Canada). Their analysis uncovered an extreme divergence between national government approval polls and

\textsuperscript{30} Sigelman, “Descriptive Generalizations,” p.583.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Studlar and Sigelman, “A Comparative Prospective,” p. 253.
congressional special election results, suggesting candidate-specific factors are more in play in U.S. congressional special elections.  

Given the importance of normal partisan forces and candidate-specific factors, Gaddie et al. hypothesized that congressional special elections were essentially a subset of open seat elections since open seat elections could be explained using the candidate-constituency framework that dominates current congressional elections research.

After analyzing all open seat and “true” congressional special elections from 1973-1997, the authors concluded that, “special elections are not unique from open-seat [elections], even though they do provide sudden, dramatic opportunities for change which makes them interesting.”

Although this more recent study of open seat and congressional special elections rigorously tested the influence of numerous variables on the Republican congressional candidate’s two-party congressional vote share in a given district, it needs updating. Not only should data covering 1998-2008 be included, and the national or local nature of these elections clearly decided, but the model needs improvement.

The campaign spending variables should be logged to account for the diminishing effect of continued campaign spending by the candidates, and the presidential approval variable should be supplemented by a broader national variable such as Stimson’s

35 Their model included presidential approval, Republican and Democratic candidate experience, Republican and Democratic candidate spending, the district composition (percent Black and Hispanic in the district), and the district normal vote regressed upon the Republican congressional candidate’s percentage of the two party vote.
“policy mood.” Calculated by amalgamating survey responses covering different policy areas, the “policy mood” variable captures the latent policy preferences of the respondents over time.

Hence, from election to election, or even on a quarterly basis, the country can be placed somewhere on a liberal to conservative continuum. Since voters may not cast a ballot based on presidential approval alone, or even remember the exact reasons they voted for one candidate over another, this more general “policy mood” variable seems appropriate for measuring the affect of national partisan tides on open seat and congressional special elections.

In addition, the work of Gaddie et al. does not account for the timing of the open seat or congressional special election relative to the general election; a variable noted in Studlar and Sigelman to be important in British by-elections. Consequently, if the timing of the congressional special election is thought to be important, congressional special elections that take place concurrently, or on the same day as presidential elections, should not be excluded from the analysis. Gaddie et al. excluded concurrent elections; only analyzing “true” congressional special elections.

1.4.1 Congressional Special Election Summary

This overview of the political science literature concerning congressional special elections highlights the motivations driving this dissertation. First, while the work of Gaddie et al. deserves praise for promoting the study of congressional special elections, their analysis could be updated and their model improved. Second, if scholars reach disparate conclusions regarding the determinants of congressional special election
outcomes, how can political pundits on cable news networks reliably imbue congressional special elections with national significance?

By updating the work of Gaddie et al. the intent of this dissertation is to clarify the scholarly debate surrounding the determinants of congressional special election outcomes and test the accuracy of the conventional wisdom presented by pundits claiming open seat and congressional special election outcomes possess national significance.

Addressing the question of whether open seat and congressional special election outcomes are influenced more by local factors or national partisan tides requires estimating the effects of the candidate’s competing in the congressional race, the constituency in which the race occurs, and the national environment at the time of the congressional election in question. These commonly employed control variables are discussed below.

1.5 Candidate Factors

Many studies estimating the effect of candidate quality have employed a simple dichotomy-did the challenger ever hold previous political office or not.\textsuperscript{36} Still, other

scholars rank candidates based on a hierarchy of offices (governor=6, House member=5, statewide official=4, and so on), multiplying that scale by the percentage of the state’s population covered by that office.\textsuperscript{37} Scholars have even incorporated measures of “celebrity” in their analysis; though there are obvious problems surrounding this subjective criterion.\textsuperscript{38}

Regardless of how the measure is conceptualized, Squire assures political scientists, “some comfort can be taken from the fact that [models employing measures of experience] almost always work as the theory predicts, producing results that are both statistically and substantively important.”\textsuperscript{39} Political experience affects congressional elections.

However, since running for office is not costless, candidates must engage in a strategic calculus when deciding whether or not to enter a political contest. Politically inexperienced candidates, faced with losing only the time and money they dedicate to the campaign are more apt to run for office despite a low probability of victory.

Conversely, experienced candidates seeking higher office must also weigh the risk associated with leaving their current electoral cocoon in pursuit of their newly desired post. Put simply, quality candidates run strategically, when political conditions present a

high probability of victory. In the words of Jacobson and Kernell, “[m]ore and better candidates appear when signs are favorable; worse and fewer when they are unfavorable. Clearly, the choices presented to voters between a pair of particular candidates in the district are not all independent of national conditions; indeed, they are a function of them.”

Banks and Kiewiet tackled candidate quality from a game theoretic perspective, finding: “High-quality candidates with previous experience in elected office, however, are far more likely to be found vying for an open seat than challenging an incumbent.” Any study analyzing open seat and congressional special elections must estimate the effect of candidate quality.

Though the issue of measuring candidate quality may inspire academic debate, the influence of campaign spending on election outcomes is universally understood. Increased campaign spending generally helps the challenger more than the incumbent. Jacobson has also found that a challengers’ level of spending in the final five or six weeks of a campaign has a substantial effect on changes in their level of support.

---

Although open seats, by definition, lack an incumbent, and are typically much more competitive contests than those between incumbents and challengers, the influence of campaign spending has to be estimated, since, according to Jacobson, “candidates for open seats tend to raise and spend more money than do other candidates.”

While candidate quality and campaign spending may be crucial to congressional elections, the emergence of quality candidates and their fundraising ability is also tied to the strength of the party in that district. The political dynamic of the constituency in question may also affect “true” congressional special elections since they occur in effective isolation. Measures of district level effects will be the next subject of inquiry.

1.6 District Factors

Congressional districts, like fingerprints, are unique. Each is composed of a varying mix of people. Some districts strongly favor one party or another, while others are more competitive or balanced. Therefore, Studlar and Sigelman’s finding that special elections are influenced by normal partisan forces should come as no surprise.

Bianco finds district forces also dictate the decisions of quality challenges. “Quality challengers appear to be more likely to run against an incumbent as the incumbent’s support in the district declines and as electoral support for the challenger’s party increases. In open-seat elections, “[an] increase in a party’s electoral support increases the probability that a party’s nominee is a quality challenger.” A number of other

45 Jacobson, Money in Congressional Elections, 106.
scholars have also found the normal partisan vote, (usually defined as one party’s share of the past presidential vote over a number of presidential elections) to be a powerful indicator of open seat election outcomes.\textsuperscript{47}

While the past presidential vote may be a valuable indicator of a district’s partisan leanings; “provid[ing] some indication of the past success of the incumbent’s party in the district, independent of the incumbent’s own electoral efforts,”\textsuperscript{48} electoral margins are themselves influenced by a district’s racial composition.\textsuperscript{49} Examining all House races from 1962-1996, Koetzle discovered “politically diverse” districts (those whose demographic characteristics are mixed and don’t strongly favor a particular party) are more competitive than races in less diverse constituencies.\textsuperscript{50} Hence, the racial composition of a district and its past presidential vote are district factors that also have to be estimated when testing whether open seat and congressional special elections are decidedly local or national affairs.

Whereas a candidate’s level of political experience and ability to raise and spend campaign funds may influence open seat or congressional special elections, the composition of a district and its political leanings may advantage one party over the


\textsuperscript{48} Ragsdale and Cook, “Representatives’ Actions and Challengers’ Reactions,” 54.


other. However, researchers must also consider the possible influence of national partisan tides in predicting vote margins and electoral outcomes at the congressional level. The next section discusses the variables used to gauge national partisan tides in this analysis; presidential approval ratings, and Stimson’s “policy mood” variable.

1.7 National Factors

Congressional elections possess national flavor. Jacobson and Kernell, suggest campaign contributions to congressional candidates fluctuate depending on current political conditions. Republican candidates will raise more money when contributors expect a Republican presidential victory, and Democrats will raise more money in Democratic presidential years. Taken together, the findings of Jacobson and Kernell (regarding strategic candidate emergence and strategic campaign contributions) suggest candidate characteristics should drive success in models of electoral outcomes; however, these outcomes will be influenced by national conditions due to the strategic behavior of candidates and campaign contributors.

Scholars have also shown the electorates propensity to punish the president’s party in midterm elections. Expectations regarding which party will capture the Oval Office and evaluations of presidential performance influence congressional elections.

Whether scholars interpret midterm elections as referenda on presidential popularity and performance, or as a more cyclical surge and decline, where the president’s party gains seats in accordance with the strength of the president’s victory, and subsequently loses seats in the midterm decline, there is a presidential pulse to congressional elections. Therefore, the expectation of midterm loss has to be estimated when analyzing open seat elections.

A number of scholars have found evidence of presidential coattails in congressional elections at the district level, whereas Campbell and Sumners and Chubb found evidence of presidential coattails in state-level analyses of U.S. Senate elections. Studies by Mondak and Flemming also showed coattails to be an important element in open seat elections. Furthermore, Flemming founds the coattail effect to be a decisive factor in thirteen percent of the open seat races analyzed from 1976-1990.


Lastly, models forecasting House elections often employ a measure of presidential approval. Looking at seventeen House elections from 1950-1982, Lewis-Beck and Rice discovered, “a one percentage point reduction in May presidential popularity would produce a loss of almost one House seat for his party in November...However, such losses would be more than offset if it were a presidential-year election, for then the president’s party is assured an extra 25 seats.”\(^5^8\) Clearly, presidential approval impacts congressional elections.\(^5^9\)

No matter which theory is applied (referenda, surge and decline, presidential coattails) the preponderance of the evidence suggests evaluations of the president influence congressional election outcomes, and particularly open seat elections. Therefore, any model accounting for the influence of national factors on open seat and congressional special election outcomes should include a measure of presidential approval in the equation.

When asked the traditional “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [insert name here] is handling his/her job as president” a respondent can use a plethora of information to formulate a response. Respondents can reflect on the health of the economy (or their own personal finances), policy promises that have either been


fulfilled or failed, or simply their personal feelings toward the president. The factors that influence a respondent’s judgment are endless.

Similarly, while many scholars incorporate measures of economic performance in their election models, such a measure was deemed too narrow for this analysis. If the goal of the analysis is to determine the influence of national tides versus local factors on open seat and congressional special election outcomes, a broader policy area needed to be employed.

To include economic evaluations in the model assumes voters cast a ballot based solely on the health of the economy (or their personal financial situation). While the economy may be an important element in a voter’s calculus, it may not be the only element.

Therefore, this project adopts a broader, more inclusive national policy variable, Stimson’s “policy mood” variable.\(^\text{60}\) This measure is not only derived from a series of survey responses covering different policy aspects, making it broader than a simple evaluation of economic conditions, it also tracks the shifting latent policy preferences of the respondents over time. Hence, “policy mood” may be an ideal variable to capture the national waves or partisan tides thought to influence open seat elections.

Traditionally, various macro-economic measures have been used in political science voting models to estimate the impact of national forces on congressional election

---

outcomes.\textsuperscript{61} Despite different approaches (indices, time periods, and control variables) most specifications produce the expected result: “the better the economy is performing, the better the congressional candidates of the president’s party do on election day.”\textsuperscript{62}

Although scholars have shown economic considerations operate asymmetrically, with voters punishing the incumbent party for economic downturns while not rewarding incumbents in times of prosperity, the fact remains economic conditions influence congressional elections.\textsuperscript{63}

Stimson’s “policy mood” variable does not discount the influence of economic evaluations on congressional election outcomes. The state of the national economy affects both presidential approval ratings and the policy mood of the electorate. Therefore, Stimson’s policy mood variable is simply a more inclusive measure of national conditions at the time of the election.


\textsuperscript{62} Jacobson, \textit{The Politics of Congressional Elections}, 5\textsuperscript{th} ed., 144.

Summary 1.8

The political science literature presented above highlights points of concurrence and contention between the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat and congressional special elections and the scholarly literature.

According to the political science literature, open seat elections are subject to national tides more than congressional special elections. Campaign contributions fluctuate, typically favoring the party that is expected to capture the presidency. However, since potential candidates and contributors act strategically, national factors may indirectly affect candidate characteristics. Presidential evaluations also figure in the phenomenon of midterm loss. Simply put, since open seats lack an incumbent, national conditions play a larger role in determining candidate recruitment, campaign funding, and the overall electoral outcome. Research corroborates the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections.

Conversely, little is known about the determinants of congressional special elections. Early research found congressional special elections to reflect referenda effects on the sitting president, while later research has determined congressional special elections are more subject to normal partisan forces. The finding that local partisan forces heavily influence congressional special elections flies in the face of the conventional wisdom surrounding congressional special election outcomes.

Pundits claim congressional special elections reflect national trends or foretell the electoral future while the political science literature suggests congressional special
elections are influenced more by the candidate-constituency model that dominates current congressional elections research.

Although the points of concurrence and contention between the conventional wisdom and political science literature regarding the determinants of open seat and congressional special election outcomes generates testable hypotheses, these hypotheses can only be tested after the variables found to influence open seat and congressional special elections are estimated.

Candidate factors such as campaign spending and prior political experience need to be accounted for, as does the racial composition of the constituency and the district’s past presidential vote. Presidential approval and the policy mood of the electorate at the time of the congressional election in question will serve as the national level controls in the statistical models presented in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER TWO: MY MODEL

2.1 Hypotheses

The intention of this dissertation is to determine the degree to which open seat and congressional special elections are influenced by local factors or national partisan tides. The hypotheses to be tested are straightforward and grounded in the political science literature. Although there is agreement between the conventional wisdom and the political science literature regarding the national nature of open seat elections, the degree of influence national factors exert on open seat elections is uncertain and requires testing.

H1-The open seat hypothesis asserts that if the conventional wisdom and political science literature are correct, open seat elections should be more influenced by national conditions and partisan tides (presidential approval and Stimson’s “policy mood”) than by local candidate or constituency factors (experience, spending, demographics, normal vote).

H2-The congressional special election hypothesis asserts that if the political science literature is correct, congressional special elections should be more influenced by local candidate or constituency factors (experience, spending, demographics, normal vote) than by national conditions or partisan tides (presidential approval and Stimson’s “policy mood”).

These two hypotheses focus on validating the political science literature concerning the determinants of open seat and congressional special election outcomes. Furthermore, if the national nature of open seat elections is confirmed, this will also
validate the conventional wisdom regarding open seat elections conveyed by media pundits. If the congressional special election hypothesis is validated, the conventional wisdom surrounding congressional special elections will be falsified, and the local nature of congressional special election contests will be firmly established with the political science literature.

Although the political science literature generates testable hypotheses that may corroborate or cast suspicion on the conventional wisdom surrounding the determinants of open seat and congressional special election outcomes, the conventional wisdom concerning open seat and congressional special elections also generates several testable hypotheses.

If electoral outcomes are seen as national referenda on presidential performance, or based on the acceptance or rejection of policy initiatives, the president’s party should suffer at the polls more than the party not occupying the presidency. This in-party/out-party hypothesis may also lend support to the national nature of open seat and congressional special election outcomes. If the in-party suffers more than the out-party in these contests (as suggested by the midterm loss literature as well as Sigelman’s early research), then perhaps the conventional wisdom regarding open seat and congressional special election outcomes as reflecting referenda effects will be strengthened.

H3-The *in-party/out-party* hypothesis asserts that if the conventional wisdom is correct the president’s party should endure more losses in open seat and congressional special election contests than the party not occupying the presidency.
Since congressional special election outcomes are often portrayed by the media as bellwethers foretelling the electoral future, this hypothesis can also be easily tested.

H4-The bellwether hypothesis asserts that if the conventional wisdom concerning congressional special elections is correct the Republican share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election should be positively associated (and statistically significant) with the Republican presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the district for the following presidential election.

Through rigorous testing of these hypotheses the credibility of the conventional wisdom concerning the national nature of open seat and congressional special elections can be determined. While these hypotheses call the media’s interpretation of open seat and congressional special election outcomes into question, the congressional special election hypothesis enables this project to determine whether congressional special elections are decidedly local or national affairs; furthering our understanding of these infrequent and understudied congressional elections.

Gaddie et al. reached one more conclusion worthy of a hypothesis. In the analysis that inspired this investigation, Gaddie et al. concluded that congressional special elections were not unique; congressional special elections were structured by the same forces that influenced open seat elections. This hypothesis can be easily tested.

H5-The subset hypothesis asserts that if Gaddie et al. are correct, and congressional special elections are essentially a subset of open seat elections structured by the same forces that influence open seat elections, when the data is merged and a final regression analyzed, the special election variable will not reach statistical significance.
2.2 Data

To validate these hypotheses data was collected on all contested open-seat and congressional special elections from 1977-2008. 1977 was chosen since as noted by Gaddie et al. campaign finance data is difficult to locate before 1977. Vacancies were identified and cross referenced through a variety of sources. This project relies heavily on the “casualty lists” from 1972-2008 furnished by the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives.¹ Other sources include the Congressional Quarterly Guide to U.S. Elections and Michael J. Durbin’s United States Congressional Elections, 1788-1997. Election and candidate background information was gathered from issues of the Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report and the Almanac of American Politics. The Almanac of American Politics and various Federal Election Commission Reports also provided the campaign finance data. Presidential approval was obtained from various Gallup polls housed at the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.² Stimson’s “policy mood” variable was obtained via his website.³ Finally, the appropriate Census provided the figures pertaining to the district’s racial composition.⁴

2.3 Decision Rules

¹ The Clerk of the House of Representatives, Lorraine C. Miller compiled the casualty lists and delivered them via electronic mail to the author of this project. Ms. Miller’s assistance in compiling and providing the vacancy data saved the author many hours of research. Without Ms. Miller’s assistance, constructing the data set would have been much harder. Many thanks are extended to the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Ms. Lorraine C. Miller.

² The Roper Center’s presidential approval database can be accessed at http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/data/presidential_approval.html (accessed August 2nd, 2010).

³ Updated from Stimson, Public Opinion in America, 2nd ed. Data can also be found at http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/time.html (access July 11th, 2010).

⁴ Census data by congressional district was obtained from various editions of The Almanac of American Politics.
Initially 629 open seats and 118 congressional special elections were identified. Once these races were identified, the task of eliminating districts followed. Since the goal of this project is to assess the importance of national tides versus local factors in determining the outcome of open seat and congressional special election contests, only districts that remained unaltered were analyzed.

For instance, the creation or elimination of a congressional district following a decennial census affects the demographic and political composition of the neighboring constituencies. Shifting populations, in turn, introduce a degree of uncertainty into any measure aimed at controlling for past voting behavior, since the previous population may not resemble the current constituency. Limiting the analysis to stable districts reduces the uncertainty surrounding the population that goes to the polls in the congressional elections to be studied.

First, on the chopping block were new districts drawn after a recent census. There were twenty-five such cases in the open seat data and one district in the congressional special election data. These districts were eliminated since they lacked a prior electoral historiography and no prior presidential vote accounting for past partisan preferences.

While some districts are created after a census, others are eliminated. Such was the case for seven of the open seat elections in the data, bringing the count of eliminated open seats up to thirty-two. There were no congressional special elections affected by this limitation. Again, population shifts breed uncertainty when controlling for the past voting behavior of a constituency.
Another cause for elimination was the dominance of one party in a particular congressional district. “Competitive” elections cannot occur if a multitude of the candidates fighting for office are from the same party.5 While districts dominated by one party may host thrilling primary elections, the paucity of primary election data over the time period of this study, along with the various methods states can employ to select candidates for congressional special elections makes a systematic study of competitive primaries nearly impossible. The dominance of one party in a particular district disqualified fourteen open seats, and eighteen congressional special elections, bringing the total eliminated to forty-six open seats and nineteen congressional special elections.

Likewise, the presence of a minor party candidate among the top two finishers occurred in thirteen open seat elections and two congressional special elections. Since the Republican and Democratic Party typically dominate American elections, any contest with a third party candidate among the top two finishers was viewed as abnormal and discarded.

Furthermore, two open seat elections, and one congressional special election took place because the incumbent simply switched parties. In reality, these elections are not open, nor special, since the incumbent was still vying for the seat. Given that these elections were simply due to a switch in party allegiances they were discarded. This brings the respective total of discarded elections to sixty-one open seats and twenty-two congressional special elections.

5 Here a race was deemed “competitive” if the top two finishers in the congressional race were from the Republican Party and the Democratic Party and if the primary (if there was one) was not dominated by a single political party as well.
An additional eighty-nine open seat elections were discarded due to missing information pertaining to the district, or data that was not reported as a result of redistricting. If a district’s boundaries were changed due to population shifts, the population being represented also changed. Such shifts make judgments about a district’s past or future voting behavior suspect. Therefore, these elections were thrown out of the data set. In addition, six open seat elections were thrown out for various, but justifiable reasons. When the purging of data ended, 156 open seat elections were thrown out, leaving 473; and twenty-two congressional special elections disappeared, leaving 96.

While these criteria eliminate a sizable portion of open seat elections, the open seat and congressional special elections remaining in the data set are unadulterated. District boundaries were not altered, the major parties were competing, and the data gathered was consistent. Therefore, the remaining congressional races can be said to be normal and unaffected by population shifts or other abnormalities.

### 2.4 Definitions

6 These cases include the territory of Guam, minority-majority districts created after the 1990 census, and one special case. Guam was excluded because the variable “presidential normal vote” could not be calculated. Although the majority-minority districts (CA-25, CA-41, NC-1, and SC-6) existed numerically in the past, their new majority-minority status would make past presidential vote a misleading variable given the differences among the past and present populations. The special case involved Henry Bonilla, a Texas congressman whose seat was thrown open after the district was redrawn and a special election was called to fill it. While Bonilla lost his seat, the district was redrawn eliminating his case from the analysis. Furthermore, if it were to be included in the data set, a subjective call would have to be made whether to include the case in the open seat or congressional special election data set.
With the sources of my data specified, and my case selection explained, the next step is defining the variables. Although this project improves upon the model of Gaddie et al., any deviations from their definitions are noted below.

While the standard definition of open seat and congressional special elections applies in this study, this project makes one subtle alteration. Previous studies have either excluded congressional special elections that take place concurrently with presidential elections, or included them in the open seat category. While concurrent congressional special elections are congressional special elections in name only since they do not occur in isolation, they are still congressional special elections. To exclude concurrent congressional special elections limits the data, while counting them as open seats may alter the results obtained in the open seat election analysis. Therefore, concurrent congressional special elections are counted and included in the congressional special election analysis.\(^7\)

### 2.4.1 Dependent Variable I

The dependent variable for testing the open seat and congressional special election hypotheses (H1 and H2) is the Republican congressional candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the congressional election in question. This dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote received by the Republican candidate in the open seat or congressional special election. For those congressional special elections

---

\(^7\) The special elections data analyzed in this project include five concurrent congressional special elections. They are the 1984 elections in Kentucky’s 7th Congressional District and New Jersey’s 13th Congressional District, New Jersey’s 3rd Congressional District and Tennessee’s 2nd Congressional District in 1988, and Missouri’s 8th Congressional District in 1996.
requiring a runoff between the top candidates, the candidate’s vote share in the runoff election is used.

Ordinary least squares regression (OLS) will be used to test the explanatory power of the following independent variables on the Republican congressional candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the congressional election.

2.4.2 Independent Variables I

1) Republican Experience-A dummy variable coded 1 if the Republican candidate for the congressional seat in question has ever held elective office. 0 otherwise. While Gaddie et al. use a measure devised by Green and Krasno, the inclusion of a celebrity criterion is subjective. Furthermore, given the success of many experience measures this dichotomy appears appropriate.

2) Democrat Experience-A dummy variable coded 1 if the Democratic candidate for the congressional seat in question has ever held elective office. 0 otherwise.

3) Republican Campaign Spending-Amount of money (in constant 2008 dollars) the Republican candidate spent in their quest for the congressional seat. While Gaddie et al. did not log this variable to account for the decreasing effect of continued campaign spending by the candidate the campaign spending variable employed in this project is logged.

4) Democrat Campaign Spending-Amount of money (in constant 2008 dollars) the Democratic candidate spent in their quest for the congressional seat.
5) Percent Black residing in the district- Taken from the census. If less than one percent was reported in the district it was recorded as zero. Democrats are expected to win more seats in districts with large minority populations.

6) Percent Hispanic residing in the district- Taken from the census. If less than one percent was reported in the district it was recorded as zero. Democrats are expected to win more seats in districts with large minority populations.

7) District Normal Vote- The average vote share of the Republican presidential candidate over the past two presidential elections. This variable provides a good measure of the partisan leanings of the district.

8) Presidential Approval- The incumbent president’s favorable approval rating in the most recent Gallup poll preceding the congressional election in question. In years where the GOP holds the presidency, the presidential approval score is calculated by subtracting 50 from the score. Under Democratic administrations, the score is calculated as 50 minus the Gallup approval rating. A negative score indicates a net disadvantage in presidential approval for the GOP. A positive score indicates a net GOP advantage.

Since the dependent variable employed in this analysis is the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the open seat or congressional special election contest, standardizing the presidential approval variable to account for the party of the incumbent president seems appropriate. The method of standardization follows the same procedure employed by Gaddie et al.

9) Policy Mood- A variable measured on a 0 to 100 scale, with higher numbers (>50) indicating a more liberal policy mood within the electorate. This variable covers many
policy areas and was calculated through survey responses. Its purpose is to capture shifts in the latent policy preferences of the electorate and signal the onset of a liberal or conservative national tide.

10) Midterm- A dummy variable coded 1 if there was a Republican in the White House, -1 if there was a Democrat in the White House, and 0 if not a midterm. This coding scheme accounts for any midterm loss phenomenon suffered by Republican presidents and was adopted since the dependent variable also focuses on the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote for the election in question.

11) Temporal Counter- Since there may be unique effects within or among election cycles, a temporal counter, measured as the year in question minus the baseline year (1977), is included as a control.

2.4.3 Dependent Variable II

The dependent variable for testing the in-party/out-party hypothesis (H3) is the President’s party’s candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the congressional election in question. This dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote received by the candidate from the president’s party in the open seat or congressional special election in question. For those congressional special elections requiring a runoff between the top candidates, the candidate’s vote share in the runoff election is used.

Ordinary least squares regression (OLS) will be used to test the explanatory power of the following independent variables on the President’s party’s candidate’s
congressional candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the congressional election in question.

2.4.4 Independent Variables II

13) President’s Party is Incumbent-A dummy variable coded 1 if the previous incumbent holding the congressional seat in question and the president are from the same party, 0 otherwise.

14) Republican President-A dummy variable coded 1 if the president is a Republican, 0 otherwise.

15) President’s Party Percent in Last Election-The percent of the two-party vote captured by the president’s party in the last presidential election in the district.

16) President’s Party Experience-A dummy variable coded 1 if the candidate from the president’s party for the congressional seat in question has ever held elective office, 0 otherwise.

17) Out Party Experience- A dummy variable coded 1 if the candidate not from the president’s party for the congressional seat in question has ever held elective office, 0 otherwise.

2.4.5 Dependent Variable III

The dependent variable for testing the bellwether hypotheses (H4) is the Republican presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the following presidential election. This dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote
received by the Republican presidential candidate in a given district in the presidential election *following* the congressional election in question.

Ordinary least squares regression (OLS) will be used to test the explanatory power of the following independent variables on the Republican presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in a given district for the following presidential election.

2.4.6 *Independent Variables III*

18) Republican Candidate Vote Share-This variable is the percent of the vote received by the Republican candidate in the congressional special election. For those congressional special elections requiring a runoff between the top candidates, the candidate’s vote share in the runoff election is used.

19) Democratic Candidate Vote Share-This variable is the percent of the vote received by the Democratic candidate in the congressional special election. For those congressional special elections requiring a runoff between the top candidates, the candidate’s vote share in the runoff election is used.

20) Percent Black residing in the district-Taken from the census. If less than one percent was reported in the district it was recorded as zero. Democrats are expected to win more seats in districts with large minority populations.

21) Percent Hispanic residing in the district-Taken from the census. If less than one percent was reported in the district it was recorded as zero. Democrats are expected to win more seats in districts with large minority populations.
22) District Normal Vote-The average vote share of the Republican presidential candidate over the past two presidential elections. This variable provides a good measure of the partisan leanings of the district.

23) Presidential Approval-The incumbent president’s favorable approval rating in the most recent *Gallup* poll preceding the congressional special election in question. In years where the GOP holds the presidency, the presidential approval score is calculated by subtracting 50 from the score. Under Democratic administrations, the score is calculated as 50 minus the *Gallup* approval rating. A negative score indicates a net disadvantage in presidential approval for the GOP. A positive score indicates a net GOP advantage.

Since the dependent variable employed in this analysis is the Republican presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the following presidential election, standardizing the presidential approval variable to account for the party of the incumbent president seems appropriate. The method of standardization follows the same procedure employed by Gaddie et al.

24) Policy Mood-A variable measured on a 0 to 100 scale, with higher numbers (>50) indicating a more liberal policy mood within the electorate. This variable covers many policy areas and was calculated through survey responses. Its purpose is to capture shifts in the latent policy preferences of the electorate and signal the onset of a liberal or conservative national tide.

25) Proximity-The proximity variable is coded as the number of days between the congressional special election and the date of the following presidential election. For
example, a congressional special election occurring the same day as the presidential election is coded with a proximity value of 0. For those congressional special elections requiring a runoff between the top candidates, the date of the runoff is coded.

26) Temporal Counter-Since there may be unique effects within or among election cycles, a temporal counter, measured as the year in question minus the baseline year (1977), is included as a control.

2.5 Models

Model 1, the Open Seat/Congressional Special Election Model(s) can be written as follows: Republican % of the district two-party vote= \( \beta_0 + \beta_1 \) R Experience + \( \beta_2 \) D Experience + \( \beta_3 \) R Campaign Spending + \( \beta_4 \) D Campaign Spending + \( \beta_5 \) % Black + \( \beta_6 \) % Hispanic + \( \beta_7 \) District Normal Vote + \( \beta_8 \) Pres. Approval + \( \beta_9 \) “Policy Mood” + \( \beta_{10} \) Midterm + \( \beta_{11} \) Temporal Counter + \( \epsilon \).

Model 2, the In Party/Out Party Model(s) can be written as follows: President’s party’s candidate share of the two-party vote= \( \beta_0 + \beta_1 \) Pres. Party is Incumbent + \( \beta_2 \) Republican President + \( \beta_3 \) Pres. Party % in Last Election + \( \beta_4 \) Pres. Party Experience + \( \beta_5 \) Out Party Experience + \( \epsilon \).

Model 3, the Congressional Special Election Presidential Vote Model can be written as follows: Republican % of the district two-party in the following presidential election= \( \beta_0 + \beta_1 \) R Vote Share + \( \beta_2 \) D Vote Share + \( \beta_3 \) % Black + \( \beta_4 \) % Hispanic + \( \beta_5 \) District Normal Vote + \( \beta_6 \) Pres. Approval + \( \beta_7 \) “Policy Mood” + \( \beta_8 \) Proximity +\( \beta_9 \) Temporal Counter + \( \epsilon \).
Though separate models will be estimated, the variance inflation factors of each model will be examined to check for multicollinearity (when two or more variables explain the same effect). Furthermore, appending a special election variable (coded 1 for congressional special elections, and 0 otherwise) to model 1 and running a final regression will determine whether congressional special elections are in fact, special.

It is not hard to imagine differences between congressional special elections and open seat elections. Congressional special elections take place throughout the year often going unreported by the media. On the other hand, open seat elections take place every two years in a political environment, and often get reported as a good or bad night for the party in power. While there is a wealth of knowledge on congressional elections, a greater understanding of congressional special elections is needed.

This dissertation fills a void in the field congressional elections research by clarifying the scholarly debate concerning the determinants of congressional special election outcomes, while simultaneously subjecting the conventional wisdom surrounding the interpretation of open seat and congressional special elections to statistical scrutiny.

Model 2 tests the in-party/out-party hypothesis. This model tests whether the president’s party is punished in open seat and congressional special elections. If referenda effects are exhibited in open seat and congressional special elections, the conventional wisdom concerning the national importance attached to open seat and congressional special election outcomes would be bolstered.
Model 3 tests the bellwether hypothesis. This model tests whether congressional special election outcomes are early indicators of presidential support in the district for the following presidential election. If congressional special elections are found to be bellwethers for the following presidential election the conventional wisdom regarding the national importance attributed to congressional special elections would also be strengthened.

Together, these models answer the questions motivating this research. Model 1 will determine whether open seat and congressional special election outcomes are influenced by local factors or national partisan tides. Thus far, the scholarly research concerning congressional special elections is scant and the finding are scattered. Model 1 is intended to clarify the scholarly debate regarding the determinants of congressional special election outcomes

Conversely, model’s 2 and 3 test the accuracy of the conventional wisdom regarding open seat and congressional special election outcomes. Model 2 tests whether referenda effects are exhibited in open seat and congressional special elections, while model 3 tests whether congressional special election outcomes are in fact electoral bellwethers indicative of future presidential support in the district. Although media pundits may imbue open seat and congressional special election outcomes the national significance, the accuracy of this interpretation remains open to investigation.

2.6 Importance of Project
Congressional special elections are an understudied phenomenon. Often thought to be idiosyncratic and unpredictable, the scant literature surrounding congressional special elections offers only generalities. While Sigelman initially concluded that congressional special election outcomes reflected referenda on the sitting president, other research pointed out the importance of candidate and constituency factors in determining the electoral outcome. In sum, the congressional special elections literature lacks a consensus.

Nonetheless, the conventional wisdom surrounding congressional special elections focuses heavily on the national implications of congressional special election outcomes. Seen as reflecting referenda on presidential performance or policy initiatives, as signaling the emergence of policy concerns, or as electoral bellwethers, congressional special elections are often imbued with national significance by the media. Yet, few systematic studies of the national or local nature of congressional special elections exist. Gaddie offered the most rigorous analysis of congressional special elections to date, but data covering 1998-2008 should be included, and variables capturing national partisan tides should be added. The intention of this dissertation is to update, and improve upon past research on congressional special elections.

Addressing the question of whether open seat and congressional special election outcomes are more influenced by local factors or national partisan tides, this dissertation serves two purposes. First, this dissertation hopes to clarify the disparate findings presented in the political science literature regarding the determinants of congressional special election outcomes. Second, this dissertation also subjects the
conventional wisdom surrounding open seat and congressional special elections to close scrutiny.

Since the media is a business focused on capturing viewers and enlarging profits (particularly the cable news network), stories about politics must be sensationalized, conflict ridden, and personality driven. The frames employed by national media outlets to explain political developments usually stress the national nature of the developments or the electoral outcome being examined. However, if the framing of the electoral outcome does not match the fundamental dynamics of how or why the race was decided, the accuracy of political coverage provided by media pundits, and the knowledge citizens bring with them to the polls should be met with skepticism.

Therefore, this project adds to the political science literature in three distinct ways. First, this dissertation determines whether open seat and congressional special election outcomes are determined by local factors or national partisan tides, aiding in the establishment of a scholarly consensus concerning the determinants of congressional special election outcomes.

Second, this analysis addresses whether congressional special elections, which are regarded as infrequent, isolated events, are similarly explained by the candidate-constituency model that dominates congressional elections research, ultimately uncovering whether congressional special elections are indeed special when compared against open seat elections.

Third, the present work compares the results of the statistical analysis of open seat and congressional special election outcomes to the conventional wisdom presented by
the national media surrounding open seat and congressional special elections. This investigation highlights the accuracy of the national media’s interpretation of open seat congressional special election outcomes.

This dissertation not only seeks a better understanding of the dynamics at work in congressional special elections, but also calls into question the accuracy of the national media’s reporting of open seat and congressional special elections. If scholars do not fully understand the dynamics of congressional special election contests, how can political pundits reliably interpret the meaning of these infrequent, yet interesting elections?
CHAPTER THREE: OPEN TO INTERPRETATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL FACTORS AND NATIONAL PARTISAN TIDES IN OPEN SEAT ELECTIONS

3.1 Introduction

As illustrated in Chapter 1, congressional elections have garnered a lot of scholarly attention over the years. Mountains of research speak to the importance of money, political experience, district demographics, and the power of incumbency in explaining the outcome of congressional elections.

These well established findings, long since accepted as part of the academic cannon on congressional research, can be attributed to the size of Congress and the frequency of its elections. With the election of 435 House members every two-years, data is plentiful, detailed models explaining electoral outcomes can be generated.

Chapter 1 also suggested that political scientists and pundits may agree that open seat election outcomes are influenced by national partisan tides. Therefore, testing the open seat hypothesis is the objective of Chapter 3. Rigorous statistical analysis will determine whether open seat elections are influenced by national partisan tides. Such testing will also serve to strengthen or weaken the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections.

3.2 Outline of Chapter

Chapter 3 proceeds in several sections. Section 3.3 presents descriptive data regarding common control variables employed in congressional research such as campaign spending, prior political experience, district demographics, and past
presidential vote. With any descriptive patterns in the data detected, Section 3.4 begins the statistical analysis of open seat elections.

Section 3.4 investigates the *in-party/out-party* hypothesis, uncovering whether the president’s party suffers more in open seat elections than the out party. If referenda effects are exhibited in open seat elections, the conventional wisdom concerning the importance of national partisan tides in explaining open seat election outcomes may be strengthened.

After analyzing the performance of the president’s party in open seat elections, Section 3.5 tests the *open seat* hypothesis via multiple statistical models. The simplest model tests the impact of candidate attributes (money and prior political experience) on open seat election outcomes. The second model adds the attributes of the constituency (demographics and past presidential vote) to the previously estimated candidate model. Finally, the third model introduces national factors to the analysis.

Though this third model is the equation of interest, by introducing the model in segments the relative explanatory power of candidate attributes, constituency dynamics, and national partisan tides on open seat election outcomes may be easier to gauge. Section 3.6 presents a conclusion.

**3.3 Open Seats and the Candidate-Constituency Environment, Some Descriptive Statistics**

Before unveiling the statistical model, descriptive statistics prove useful in determining if either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party possesses any discernable advantages when competing to fill open seats in the House of
Representatives. Table’s 3.1 and 3.2 present descriptive statistics on candidate spending and elective experience respectively. Table’s 3.3 and 3.4 highlight district demographics and past presidential vote respectively, indicating the degree to which Republican electoral success in open seat contests depends on the character of the district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1</th>
<th>Average Candidate Spending by Party in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Republican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-1988</td>
<td>$838,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-1998</td>
<td>$818,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2008</td>
<td>$1,447,655</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Spending is in constant 2008 dollars
Source: Various FEC reports and editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* provided the data.

Table 3.1 indicates that from 1978-2008 average Republican and Democrat spending in open seat elections (in constant 2008 dollars) is fairly even. In the first period under consideration, on average the Republican candidate outspent the Democratic candidate by thirty-five thousand dollars. The previous Republican advantage became a Democratic one in the 1990’s, and from 2000-2008 average spending in open seat elections was nearly identical across party lines.

Table 3.2 breaks down another electoral advantage, previous political experience, by political party and level of experience.
Table 3.2
Candidate Experience by Party and Office, 1978-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Elected Office</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>42.49%</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>37.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Legislator</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>36.58%</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>35.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other State Office</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.07%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Official</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>14.38%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>19.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US House</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.48%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Various editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* provided the data.

Table 3.2 shows that again the parties are relatively even in their disbursement of candidates with previous elected experience. From 1978-2008 more Republican candidates were political newcomers than Democrats. The two parties drew roughly the same number of candidates from the state House or Senate; while more Democrats than Republicans fled their local elective position (city council, school board, local judge, alderman, mayor, etc.) to run for the open seat.

While the descriptive data suggests neither party enjoyed an advantage in the area of political experience, scholars must remember that sometimes the *lack* of experience can be an advantage if the public is sufficiently disappointed with the “politics as usual” mindset, or Washington is portrayed as exceedingly corrupt by a skillful, strategic candidate. Political neophytes such as the former football star Steve Largent and entertainer Sonny Bono capitalized on such sentiment and were swept into Congress during the “Republican Revolution” of 1994.

The next table investigates the racial composition of the district and the resulting success of the Republican candidate in open seat elections.
The pattern in Table 3.3 is clear and needs little elaboration. While Republicans won just over half of the 473 open seats considered in the analysis spanning 1978-2008, their greatest success (sixty-one percent) came in districts containing a low percentage (less than ten percent) of black constituents. Republicans were able to capture far fewer open seats in districts with a larger percentage of black constituents.

While the data is not evenly distributed, with almost seventy percent of the open seats occurring in districts with low minority populations, clearly the racial composition of a district impacts the subsequent voting behavior of the constituency, and ultimately, the outcome in open seat elections.

The 2006 contest in Tennessee’s Ninth Congressional District illustrates the decisive role demographics can play in open seat elections. This race also highlights an aspect of the “strategic politician” theory advanced by Jacobson and Kernell: the candidates competing for office structure the choices available to the electorate; in the 2006 Democratic primary in Tennessee’s Ninth Congressional District there were plenty of choices.

### Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Black in District</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>GOP Won</th>
<th>GOP Winning %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>61.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1-30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>54.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The appropriate US Census provided the district demographic data.
3.3.1 The Ford’s and Racial Fracturing

Created in 1983, Tennessee’s Ninth Congressional District was represented by Harold Ford Sr. until his retirement in 1996. Following in his father’s footsteps, Harold Ford Jr. easily won the 1996 Democratic primary and coasted through the general election; defeating the Republican candidate Rod DeBerry 61 percent to 37 percent.¹ Routinely reelected by wide margins, Harold Ford Jr. would not stand for reelection in 2006; opting instead to run for Republican Bill Frist’s Senate seat following Frist’s pledge to only serve two terms. Amid a hotly contested, controversial campaign, Ford narrowly lost to Republican Bob Corker, 48 percent to 51 percent.²

With no clear successor, Ford’s electoral ambitions ensured a competitive Democratic primary would occur for the first time in over twenty years. Widely regarded as the real contest in Tennessee’s Ninth Congressional District due to its majority-minority status (the district is 59.5 percent black according to the 2000 Census), the 2006 Democratic primary featured a crowded field of fifteen candidates.

The largely inexperienced field, composed chiefly of attorneys, businessman, and community activists, featured twelve black candidates, including Ford’s cousin Joseph Ford Jr. State Senator Steve Cohen, a white candidate, who ran for the congressional

¹ Election information was provided by the Clerk of the House of Representatives and can be found at [http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/1996/96Stat.htm#42](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/1996/96Stat.htm#42) (accessed July 3rd, 2010).
² Election statistics were provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State. Vote totals can be found at [http://www.state.tn.us/sos/election/results/2006-11/en4uss.pdf](http://www.state.tn.us/sos/election/results/2006-11/en4uss.pdf) (accessed July 4th, 2010). Controversy stemmed from the infamous “Call Me” ad sponsored by the Republican National Committee. The ad, which ran in late October, featured a scantily clad white woman posing as a Playboy bunny who, ‘met Harold at the Playboy party’ and invites him to ‘call me’. Many saw the ad as overtly racist, playing on preexisting prejudices regarding black man and white woman.
seat in 1996, was one of the few formidable candidates with name recognition beyond Memphis.

Although six candidates raised more money than Cohen, and Nikki Tinker outspent him by a 2-1 margin, Cohen won the August 3rd Democratic primary with thirty-one percent of the vote to Tinker’s twenty-five percent. Together, the top four black candidates captured an astounding fifty-seven percent of the primary vote.

While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact causes of Cohen’s primary victory without detailed exit poll data, the splintering of the black vote in the majority black constituency certainly helped Cohen. Unable to unite behind one black candidate and increase the descriptive representation of blacks in Congress, Tennessee sent the first Jewish member of its delegation to Washington. While politicians may act strategically, in this case the electorate did not follow suit.

3.3.2 Summary

So far the descriptive data surrounding open seat elections do not present any surprising results. Overall, spending and prior political experience is fairly even; and evenly distributed among Democrats and Republicans. Unsurprisingly, the racial

---

3 The results of the 2006 Democratic primary election in Tennessee’s 9th Congressional District were provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State and can be found at [http://state.tn.us/sos/election/results/2006-08/demush.pdf](http://state.tn.us/sos/election/results/2006-08/demush.pdf) (accessed July 11th, 2010). Campaign spending figures for the various candidates were provided by the Center for Responsive Politics, and can be found at [http://www.opensecrets.org/races/summary.php?id=TN09&cycle=2006](http://www.opensecrets.org/races/summary.php?id=TN09&cycle=2006) (accessed July 4th, 2010).

4 Data provided by the Tennessee Secretary of State at the above address (accessed July 11th, 2010). This percentage was calculated by totaling the number of votes cast for Nikki Tinker (19164), Joseph S. Ford Jr. (9334), Julian Bolton (8055), and Edward Stanton (6927) and dividing by the total number of votes cast (76359). 43480 votes divided by 76359 equals 56.94 percent.

5 For a discussion of descriptive representation see David T. Cannon, Race, Redistricting, and Representation: The Unintended Consequences of Black Majority Districts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
composition of a district also helps or hinders Republican electoral success in open seat contests. Table 3.4 below also suggests Republican electoral success in open seat contests is directly related to the strength of the Republican Party in the district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>GOP Won</th>
<th>GOP Winning %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.1-55</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>58.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>71.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>54.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Normal Vote was calculated as the average vote in the district for the GOP's past two presidential candidates

Source: Various editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* provided the data

Districts that are unfriendly to GOP’s presidential nominees are also unwelcoming to Republican congressional candidates fighting for open seats. The Republican Party did not capture a single open seat in districts where its presidential nominees averaged less than thirty percent of the vote over the last two presidential elections. Furthermore, the GOP’s congressional candidates only won thirty-seven percent of the open seat contests in districts where the GOP normal vote for president averaged between thirty to forty-five percent.

3.3.3 Cynthia McKinney

Consider the case of Cynthia McKinney, the twice deposed Democrat who represented Georgia’s Fourth Congressional District from 1996-2002, and again from 2004-2006. Republican presidential support in the heavily black district only topped
thirty percent in the 1996 presidential election, when it reached thirty-two percent.\footnote{Michael Barone and Grant Ujifusa, \textit{The Almanac of American Politics, 1998} (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Group, 1997), 415.} McKinney’s challenges were not mounted by Republicans. In Georgia’s Fourth Congressional District, the real contest is the Democratic primary.

McKinney lost the 2002 primary to Democrat Denise Majette following McKinney’s public criticisms of the United States’ policy toward the Middle East, and McKinney’s belief that President George W. Bush “may” have had prior knowledge of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks.\footnote{Ibid.}

Early polls had Majette leading McKinney 41\% - 37\%; unusual, since incumbents rarely face credible primary challenges from lesser-known candidates. Although McKinney’s comments were written off as, “loony”, the race received increased media attention following the defeat of Congressman Earl Hilliard of Alabama, a fellow critic of U.S. policy toward the Middle East.\footnote{Ibid.}

Between June and the August 22\textsuperscript{nd} primary, it became known that over the past five years one-third of McKinney’s contributions had come from donors with Arab-American or Muslim names, and eighteen of her donors were officers of Muslim foundations under investigation by the FBI.\footnote{Ibid.}

While Majette continued to raise money, McKinney kept attacking her opponent as a tool of white interests (Majette is black) and someone who is against reparations for
descendants of slaves. Majette stayed above the fray, discussing domestic issues and McKinney’s poor record on constituent service. The final tally saw Majette win the primary 58%-42%, with blacks voting 2-1 for McKinney, and whites 9-1 for Majette.\textsuperscript{10}

When Majette departed Congress after only one term to become a candidate for Senate, McKinney instantly became the favorite in the 2004 Democratic primary. Winning enough votes to avoid a runoff, the controversial McKinney was headed back to Washington.

However, McKinney’s return to Washington would be short lived. An altercation with a Capitol Hill Police Officer (who did not recognize McKinney as a member of Congress because she was not wearing the identifying lapel pin) on the morning of March 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2006 portrayed McKinney in an unfavorable light. Electorally vulnerable and historically controversial, the embattled Democrat faced a primary challenge in 2006 from DeKalb County Commissioner Hank Johnson.

Although McKinney would finish first in the July 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2006 Democratic primary contest; edging out Johnson 47.1 percent to 44.4 percent, since neither candidate won a majority of the vote, a runoff election was scheduled for August 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2006.\textsuperscript{11}

For Hank Johnson, the focus of the three week campaign was McKinney. Johnson pointed out to voters that McKinney missed a vote to extend the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and he called McKinney’s controversial behavior embarrassing leadership in office. The negative campaigning worked. Hank Johnson won a resounding victory, 

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 471.
garnering 59 percent of the vote in the primary runoff. Hank Johnson cruised through the general election winning 75 percent of the vote to Republican Catherine Davis’ 25 percent.

The case of Cynthia McKinney illustrates the power of partisanship. Representing a heavily Democratic majority-minority district, McKinney could have had a long and prosperous career if she was not so controversial. Forgiven by voters once and reelected to Congress in 2004, McKinney’s behavior prompted Hank Johnson’s Democratic primary challenge in 2006. Despite Johnson’s negative campaign and his attacks on McKinney, voters decided overwhelmingly to send the Democrat to Congress. With no credible, “strategic” Republican challenger running in such a stronghold of the Democratic Party, Hank Johnson’s easy victory is unsurprising. Not dissuaded by tactics, the Democratic nature of the district carried Hank Johnson into Congress.

Table 3.4 points out that the Republican Party does not enjoy real success in open seat elections for Congress unless the congressional race takes place in districts where the GOP fielded a competitive presidential nominee. The Republican congressional candidate captures the open seat more than half of the time if the Republican Party’s presidential nominee is on the cusp of capturing a majority of the vote within that congressional district as well. If the GOP normal vote in the district exceeds fifty-five percent, the Republican Party’s candidate fighting for the open seat emerges victorious in seventy-two percent of the cases analyzed from 1978-2008.

_________________________

12 Ibid.
3.3.4 Jason Chaffetz

Consider the case of Jason Chaffetz, a Republican elected in 2008 to represent Utah’s Third Congressional District amid a national wave of discontent with the Republican Party. The GOP’s district normal vote in this heavily white (80 + percent) bastion of the Republican Party was 76 percent.\(^{14}\) Such high levels of partisan support meant Chaffetz’s real challenge (like Ford’s and McKinney’s above) was winning the party primary.

Chaffetz entered the Republican primary in October 2007 at a steep disadvantage. The Republican incumbent Chaffetz hoped to unseat, Chris Cannon, had more money and wider name recognition than the younger, inexperienced, Chaffetz. However, Chaffetz quickly went on the offensive, criticizing Cannon’s support of President Bush’s proposal for a guest worker program and a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.\(^{15}\) Both ideas deeply unpopular in the conservative Third Congressional District, Chaffetz countered Cannon’s position on immigration by calling for the deportation of all illegal immigrants and the construction of tent cities, ringed by barbed-wire fences to detain immigrants who committed crimes while in the United States.\(^{16}\)

Chaffetz also lambasted Cannon for earmarking funds for special projects in the district and cast Cannon as symptomatic of why the Republicans lost their House

\(^{14}\) 77 percent of the district voted for George W. Bush in 2004, while 75 percent of the district for George W. Bush in 2000. For these statistics see The Almanac of American Politics, 2006 and The Almanac of American Politics, 2002 respectively.


\(^{16}\) Ibid.
majority in 2006. Supported by an increasingly unpopular president, George W. Bush, Chris Cannon lost the Republican primary 40 percent to Chaffetz’s 60 percent, despite raising more than four times the amount of money of Chaffetz. Chaffetz would easily defeat his general election opponent, Democrat Bennion Spencer, 66 percent to 28 percent, to capture the seat in 2008.

Table’s 3.3 and 3.4, and the examples that accompany them above, suggest the composition of the constituency and the political dynamics of the district go far in explaining Republican electoral prospects in open seat contests. In the cases of Ford and McKinney, high minority populations (and therefore, low Republican support) fostered easy Democratic open seat victories. Conversely, Chaffetz’s election was the result of a heavily white population that still heavily supported the Republican Party amidst an anti-Republican national mood.

Republican candidates win more open seats in whiter districts with a history of support for the Republican Party’s presidential nominees. Table 3.5 accentuates this point by looking at Republican open seat electoral success and whether Republican open seat candidates ran ahead, or behind, the average district normal vote for president.

\[\text{http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/data/presidential_approval.html}\] (accessed August 4th, 2010).


Ibid., 1504.

Ibid., 1503.

In 2008 Republican presidential nominee, John McCain garnered 77 percent of the two-party presidential vote in Utah’s Third Congressional District, a full 31 points higher than his national average.
Table 3.5 highlights two interesting facts. First, Republican open seat candidates ran behind the average district normal vote more often than not (255 cases to 218 cases). Second, Republican open seat candidates enjoyed more success when they ran ahead of the average district normal vote for president; winning seventy-two percent of the time. In contrast, Republican candidates won less than forty percent of the races when trailing behind the average district normal vote. However, any disparities between the varying levels of past support for Republican presidential nominees need to be examined before conclusions regarding the average district normal vote can be reached.

Whether the Republican candidate competing for the open seat ran ahead or behind the average district normal vote for president, the average district normal vote is substantially higher in races the Republican candidate won, versus those the Republican candidate lost. Furthermore, it is no surprise the Republican candidate won ninety-nine contests when trailing behind the average district normal vote. The average district normal vote in these races was sixty-one percent!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ran Ahead of Pres</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Winning %</th>
<th>Average Margin</th>
<th>Average Normal Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Won</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>72.48%</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>49.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>27.52%</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>35.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>46.09%</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>45.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ran Behind Pres</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Winning %</th>
<th>Average Margin</th>
<th>Average Normal Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Won</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>38.82%</td>
<td>-6.36</td>
<td>61.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>61.18%</td>
<td>-11.25</td>
<td>48.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>53.91%</td>
<td>-9.35</td>
<td>53.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.5 contains several other patterns as well. Republican open seat candidates ran ahead of the average district normal vote and won in close districts at the presidential level. In districts where the Republican open seat candidate outpaced the average district normal vote and lost, Republican candidates only ran ahead of the average district normal vote due to previous low levels of support for Republican presidential nominees.

Although, Republican candidates for congressional open seats ran behind the average district normal vote and lost more often than they won (156 cases to 99 cases), the average margin between the open seat outcome and the average district normal vote in these losses was 11.25 percent. Such a wide gap suggests these districts may be more competitive at the presidential level than at the congressional level. Finally, extremely high levels of previous support for Republican presidential nominees explains the ability of Republican open seat candidates to run behind the average district normal vote and win.

These patterns lead to three conclusions. First, Republican candidates fighting for the open seat benefit the most from running ahead of the president in historically competitive districts at the presidential level. If the district is historically noncompetitive for president, the Republican candidate for the open seat cannot overcome previous low levels of support for Republican presidential nominees. Second, if the Republican open seat candidate runs behind the president in historically competitive districts at the presidential level they do so at their peril. In these contests Republican open seat candidates average a mere thirty-seven percent of the two-party
vote in the district. Lastly, Republican open seat candidates also benefit from exceedingly high levels of support for previous Republican presidential nominees. Although Republican open seat candidates may run behind the average district normal vote in these races, the partisan nature of the district allows for some electoral slippage.

Table 3.5 illustrates one clear point: the standing of Republican presidential nominees in the district is an important indicator of Republican electoral success in open seat contests. However, descriptive statistics are not definitive. The results in Table 3.5 underscore the importance of the “strategic politician” theory espoused by Jacobson and Kernell.

For instance, if Jacobson and Kernell’s theory is correct, extremely high levels of support for previous Republican presidential nominees should lead to fewer quality “strategic” Democratic candidates willing to enter the open seat contest due to the low probability of victory. Similarly, low levels of previous support for Republican presidential nominees should send the same signal, for the same reason, to quality “strategic” Republican open seat candidates.

If candidates are meant to structure the choices available to the electorate, and the disadvantaged party within the district is left with nothing more than sacrificial lambs to offer upon the electoral altar, does that constitute a meaningful choice? No! As the case studies demonstrate, in districts dominated by a particular party, the real choice is
offered in the party primary. Therefore, the presidential pulse may only manifest itself in truly competitive districts.

Since there appears to be a presidential pulse to congressional open seat elections, Table 3.6 investigates another theory commonly connecting the presidency to congressional elections, referenda effects. If referenda effects exist, the bulk of the partisan turnover in open seat elections should come at the expense of the president’s party. The results are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partisan Turnover by Party and President in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Seats...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost by Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost by Incumbent From President's Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost During Midterm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost During Midterm by President's Party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several patterns emerge from Table 3.6. First open seat elections account for a high degree of partisan turnover in Congress. From 1978-2008, 29 percent of open seat contests resulted in partisan turnover. Conversely, only 5.5 percent of seats held by an incumbent resulted in such a switch during this time period.

---


23 The incumbent reelection rate was calculated by averaging the reelection rates from 1978-2008 presented in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1.
Second, while both parties lost a similar number of open seats to the opposing party, the overwhelming majority of the partisan turnover in open seat contests came at the expense of the president’s party. 72.5 percent of Republican seats (50 of 69) that went to Democrats occurred under Republican presidents. The Democrats turned in a slightly better percentage, losing 64.71 percent of Democratic seats (44 of 68) under Democratic presidents.

Third, referenda effects are especially evident during off year elections. Of the 50 seats lost by Republicans while a Republican was in the White House, 36 (72 percent) occurred during midterm elections. Similarly, of the 44 lost by Democrats while a Democrat was in the Oval Office, 37 (84.1 percent) occurred during midterm elections.

3.3.5 Summary

The findings presented in Table 3.6 lead to one conclusion: partisan turnover occurs much more rapidly in open seat elections (29 percent) than in elections with an incumbent (5.5 percent). Furthermore, turnover in open seat elections occurs more frequently at the expense of the president’s party (68.61 percent to 31.39 percent) and is especially evident during off year elections. Moving beyond descriptive statistics, Section 2.4 begins by testing whether the president’s party suffers more in open seat contests than the out party.

3.4 Is the In-Party In Trouble in Trouble in Open Seat Elections?

The descriptive statistics presented above suggest Republican success in open seat elections is tied to the composition of the constituency and the political dynamic of the individual district. Increased support for Republican presidential hopefuls in the district
leads to an easier electoral road for Republican candidates competing for congressional open seats. However, Table 3.6 highlights that the presidential pulse in congressional elections cuts both ways. While presidential coattails may help sweep congressional candidates from the president’s party into office, midterm elections often serve as a vehicle for voter discontent, disproportionately affecting the president’s party.

Table 3.7 below presents three regression models to explain the president’s party’s performance in open seat elections. The first model is a simple bivariate regression estimate of the relationship between the president’s party’s vote and whether the outgoing incumbent was of the president’s party. The second model controls for the party of the incumbent president and the president’s share of the district vote in the last election. The third model introduces controls for the political experience of the president’s and opposition party’s candidates. The results are presented below.
Table 3.7 President’s Party’s Performance in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party Incumbent</td>
<td>12.47***</td>
<td>5.795***</td>
<td>4.029***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.983)</td>
<td>(0.865)</td>
<td>(0.878)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican President</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-5.789***</td>
<td>-4.932***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.843)</td>
<td>(0.820)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party % Last Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.650***</td>
<td>0.613***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td>(0.037)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party Exp</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.087***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.814)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-Party’s Experience</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-4.160***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.781)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>40.73***</td>
<td>14.776***</td>
<td>17.663***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.727)</td>
<td>(1.679)</td>
<td>(1.757)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.253</td>
<td>0.540</td>
<td>0.576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the president's party's candidate share of the two-party vote in the open seat election

As the results in Table 3.7 indicate, the prior control of the district goes far in explaining the vote share of the president’s party. The prior incumbency variable by itself (Model I) explains twenty-five percent of the variance in the dependent variable and holds significance across two multivariate equations.

However, when presidential control variables are added (Model II) the explanatory power of the prior incumbency variable is slashed in half, and any associated Republican incumbency advantage is neutralized under Republican presidents. Hence,
when the GOP is in the White House, its candidates do worse in open seat elections. Still, prior support for the president in the district looms large in determining the outcome of the open seat election. For every one percent of the vote the president garnered in the last election, that party’s open seat candidate can also expect .65 percent of the vote on election-day. Model II explains fifty-four percent of the variance in the dependent variable, more than double the previous model.

Adding variables to control for candidate experience (Model III) increases the fit of the model slightly and decreases the impact of the previously estimated variables as well. Nonetheless, political experience benefits the out-party’s candidate. The results in Table 3.7 lead to two conclusions. First, the president’s party’s candidates are handicapped in open seat races if a Republican occupies the Oval Office. On average, holding all other variables constant, Republican candidates in open seat contests can expect to lose almost five percent of the open seat vote if the president is also a Republican.

Second, under the right circumstances Democrats are not immune from harm either. The Democratic incumbency advantage (row 1) can quickly be erased if the Republicans field an experienced candidate (row 5) and the Democrats do not (row 4). Such an experience imbalance would result in a net disadvantage for the Democratic open seat candidate.

\[24\] Multicollinearity was not an issue in the in-party/out-party model. The variance inflation factor was only 1.27 for Model III. VIF statistics around 10 indicate multicollinearity could be a problem.
To demonstrate the negative effect of Republican presidents on their party’s open candidates two cases were selected out of the 473 open seats analyzed. The only difference between the cases is the party of the president at the time. Henry Gonzalez (D-TX) retired from Congress in 1998 while Democrat Bill Clinton was president, while John Thune (R-SD) retired from Congress in 2002 while Republican George W. Bush was president. Model III above predicts Gonzalez’s two-party vote share to be 60.62 percent, while Thune is predicted to do exact four points worse, winning 56.62 percent of the vote.²⁵

3.4.1 Summary

The results from Table 3.7 confirm the in-party hypothesis in open seat elections (H3). The in-party does appear to be in trouble in open seat contests. Republican candidates lose an average of five percent at the polls under Republican presidents. On the other hand, the Democratic disadvantage is miniscule, and only occurs when an experience imbalance favors the Republican candidate fighting for the open seat. Section 3.5 focuses on discovering whether the sources of the in-party’s disadvantage are local or national in nature.

3.5 Testing the Open Seat Hypothesis

The results from Table 3.7 lay the groundwork for further analysis. If the in-party is disadvantaged in open seat elections, where does the disadvantage stem from? Is the

²⁵ While Model III only explains a little less than sixty percent of the variance in the dependent variable, Model III comes pretty close to modeling the actual outcomes in these two races. In Gonzalez’s case the Democrat captured 63.17 percent of the two-party vote, three percent higher than estimated. In Thune’s case the Republican garnered 53.47 percent of the two-party vote, three percent lower than estimated.
disadvantage a product of candidate or constituency factors? Or, is the disadvantage induced more through national factors as the conventional wisdom suggests?

Table 3.8 below presents three regression models aimed at parsing out the determinants of the Republican candidate’s performance in open seat elections. The first model only addresses the candidate resources argument. Model I tests the degree to which candidate spending and prior political experience influences open seat election outcomes. Model II adds controls to account for district demographics and the district normal vote for past Republican presidential nominees. Hence, Model II lays out the traditional candidate-constituency model that dominates current congressional elections research. Model III then adds controls for presidential approval, the national policy mood of the electorate, and midterm loss. Model III tests the accuracy of the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections and are the basis for the open seat hypothesis. The results are presented below.
## Table 3.8 Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Open Seat Elections, 1978-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Exp</td>
<td>2.736***</td>
<td>1.847***</td>
<td>2.249***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.735)</td>
<td>(0.693)</td>
<td>(0.625)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Exp</td>
<td>-1.751**</td>
<td>-1.265*</td>
<td>-1.229*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.748)</td>
<td>(0.699)</td>
<td>(0.629)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Spending (ln$)</td>
<td>6.027***</td>
<td>4.607***</td>
<td>4.127***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.336)</td>
<td>(0.355)</td>
<td>(0.324)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Spending (ln$)</td>
<td>-4.785***</td>
<td>-4.181***</td>
<td>-3.682***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.324)</td>
<td>(0.314)</td>
<td>(0.290)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.109***</td>
<td>-0.079***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.072**</td>
<td>-0.079**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.216***</td>
<td>0.359***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
<td>(0.035)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval (Oct.)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.127***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.452***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Loss</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-2.911***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.530)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>-0.054</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>0.225***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.043)</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>32.566***</td>
<td>32.801***</td>
<td>48.957***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.637)</td>
<td>(5.860)</td>
<td>(7.891)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.598</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>0.719</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Note: Dependent variable is the Republican share of the two-party vote in the open seat election

Model I suggests candidate resources play an important role in open seat election outcomes. Both candidate experience and candidate spending are highly statistically significant and hold some level of significance across the other equations estimated. Also, both experience and candidate spending advantage the Republican open seat candidate more than the Democrat. Furthermore, the difference in magnitude between the candidate spending and candidate experience variables shows candidate spending to be a more important element to electoral victory than candidate experience. The simple candidate attributes model also explains almost sixty percent of the variance in the dependent variable, the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in open seat elections.26

Adding variables to control for district demographics and past presidential voting behavior (Model II) increases the fit of the model, and decreases the explanatory effect of candidate spending and prior political experience. Nonetheless, the Republican candidate’s overall spending and experience advantage is maintained.

Model II also indicates that minorities harm the electoral hopes of Republican open seat candidates. Looking at the coefficients for Black and Hispanic, for every ten

26 On page 51, in footnote 10 of Elections to Open Seats, the authors claim that logging the candidate spending variables left the coefficients unchanged and decreased the overall fit of the model. Since this analysis logs the candidate spending variables, Gaddie’s open seat model estimating the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in open seat elections can be found in the appendix (see Table 3.8b). Not only is the candidate spending variable drastically different, but Gaddie’s model performs poorly in comparison to the model advanced in this analysis.
percent of black’s living in the district, the Republican candidate’s vote share in the open seat contest decreases by about one percent, ceteris paribus. It takes about fourteen percent of Hispanic’s residing in the district to produce the same electoral effect (though in Model III, the effect of demographics is similar for both black and Hispanic).

Finally, Model II indicates the importance of prior support for past Republican presidential nominees. Every five percent of support for prior Republican presidential nominees in the district translates into a little more than one percent of support for the Republican open seat candidate running in that district, ceteris paribus.

The statistical significance and explanatory power of Model II is not surprising. The candidate-constituency model contains standard variables employed in congressional elections research. Still, the model contains no variables measuring national factors; yet the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections is distinctly national in scope. Model III addresses this incongruity, adding national level variables to the previously estimated candidate-constituency model and subjecting the conventional wisdom on open seat elections to statistical analysis. If national conditions motivate the calculus of “strategic” politicians as Jacobson and Kernell posit, national conditions should be correlated with the electoral outcome due to strategic behavior on the part of the candidate.

To understand the impact of national factors on open seat elections it is useful to contrast the shifting coefficients in Model’s II and III first. A quick comparison of the two models reveals the relatively stability of prior political experience. The candidate spending coefficients drop roughly one-half of one percent for both Republicans and
Democrats, but candidate spending remains more important than possessing prior political experience. It is also worth noting the Republican advantage in both experience and candidate spending is still present.

Looking at the district variables, the relative power of black’s compared to Hispanic’s disappeared. In Model III both minorities exert the same influence on the Republican candidate’s vote share in open seat contests. However, the coefficient for the district normal vote has increased by more than fifty percent. Now, the Republican open seat candidate can count on one percent of the vote for every three percent given to past Republican presidential nominees, not five percent as previously estimated. In sum, candidate attributes and the composition of the constituency, both racially and politically, remain strong influences on open seat electoral outcomes.

The variables measuring national effects in open seat elections are also significant. For every one point increase in average October approval rating under a Republican president, or every one point decrease in average October approval rating under a Democratic president, the GOP candidate vying for the open seat gains .127 percent of the vote, holding all other variables constant. Nonetheless, small coefficients can produce large affects on the open seat vote if presidential approval was subject to large shifts from election to election. Figure 3.1 below plots the average October presidential approval rating for each congressional election year from 1978-2008.27

27 The presidential approval data in Figure 3.1 reflects the results of the latest Gallup presidential approval poll conducted prior to the November election. The data was provided by the Roper Center and can be found at [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/data/presidential_approval.html](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/data/presidential_approval.html) (accessed July 11th, 2010).
Figure 3.1 highlights the unstable nature of presidential approval. While some congressional elections saw a meager shift in presidential approval of five to eight points, other congressional election years witnessed more substantial shifts of thirteen to twenty-four points. Therefore, the affect of presidential approval ratings on the open seat contest ranges anywhere from one to three percentage points (.127 multiplied by the 8-24 shift in presidential approval). The average shift in presidential approval from 1978-2008 was 10.25 percent. Hence, on average, holding all other variables constant, presidential approval affects the Republican candidate’s open seat vote share by slightly more than one percent (.127 multiplied by 10.25).

---

The average shift in presidential approval was calculated by totaling the absolute value of the shift in presidential approval (164 points) and dividing by the number of elections in this study (16).
When more substantial shifts in presidential approval are present, such as Reagan’s sixteen point jump in approval from 42 percent in October 1982 to 58 percent in October 1984, Republican open seat candidate’s could expect to receive an average of slightly more than two percent more of the open seat vote share (.127 multiplied by the 16 point shift in presidential approval), ceteris paribus. In contrast, George H. W. Bush’s precipitous decline in presidential approval from an October average of 58 percent in October 1990 to an average of 34 percent in October 1992 detracted from the Republican candidate’s share of the open seat vote by slightly more than three percentage points (.127 multiplied by the 24 point drop in presidential approval) ceteris paribus.

In sum, though presidential approval may be volatile from election to election, its overall impact on open seat races operates at the margins. Since the average margin of victory in open seat races from 1978-2008 was 18.36 percent, presidential approval may only be a decisive factor in close open seat elections. The latent policy mood of the country at the time of the election operates in the same fashion. Figure 3.2 presents the shift in policy mood from 1978-2008.29

29 Data on the “policy mood” of the electorate was updated from James A. Stimson, Public Opinion in America, 2nd ed. Data can also be found at [http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/time.html](http://www.unc.edu/~jstimson/time.html), accessed July 11th, 2010.)
Figure 3.2 reveals the latent policy mood of the United States electorate has ranged from a conservative 52.6 in 1980 to a more liberal high of 66.1 in 1990. This 13.5 point shift in latent policy mood from 1980 to 1990 translates into a shift of a little more than six percent of the vote in open seat contests, holding all other variables constant (.452 multiplied by 13.5). The latent policy mood of the electorate is not a decisive factor in determining the outcome of open seat elections if the average margin of victory in open seat contests from 1978-2008 was more than eighteen percentage points.

The average shift in the country’s latent policy mood from election to election was about three points; meaning the national policy mood of the electorate accounted for a shift of 1.5 percent of the vote share in open seat elections (.452 multiplied by 3). The largest single shift in a congressional election occurred from 1992 to 1994. During this
time, the policy mood of the electorate shifted from a liberal 63.1 to a more conservative 54.3. This nearly nine point shift in the policy mood of the electorate benefited Republican open seat candidates four percent at the polls (.452 multiplied by the 8.8 point shift in policy mood), helping explain the 1994 “Republican Revolution.”

3.5.1 Summary

After analyzing the affect of national factors on the Republican candidate’s share of the open seat vote, one thing is clear. National factors are most influential in deciding close open seat elections. The average affect of shifts in October presidential approval is a little more than one percent of the vote in open seat elections (and three percent when drastic shifts occur), and shifts in policy mood affect the average open seat contest by a mere 1.5 percent (and four percent when drastic shifts occur). National factors appear to be influential at the margins in open seat elections.

Jacobson reaches a similar conclusion, stating,

“[t]he strong post-war trend toward a more candidate-centered style of electoral politics would reduce the electoral importance of national factors while enhancing that of individual candidates and campaigns. In more candidate-centered campaigns, the resources and talents of challengers would have a larger impact on district-level results.”

The marginal influence of national factors in deciding open seat contests contradicts the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections. In Model III, the coefficients attached to candidate qualities such as Republican and Democrat experience and campaign spending equal or surpass the effect of national factors in open seat contests such as the average October presidential approval rating or the latent policy mood of the electorate.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, candidate qualities such as campaign spending and political experience are more correlated with the electoral outcome than national conditions.\textsuperscript{32}

National factors only approximate the effect of candidate-level variables when they are subject to wide swings. The size of the coefficient related to the district normal vote, and the ease in which even poor Republican presidential candidates can secure twenty percent of the district vote (translating into a seven percent affect on the vote share) lends further credence to the importance of candidate and constituency variables having a greater impact on open seat contests than national factors.

Therefore, the general open seat hypothesis is rejected, and the conventional wisdom concerning open seat elections is incorrect. National level factors are only decisive in close open seat elections. National level factors register the greatest impact

\textsuperscript{31} Multicollinearity was not an issue in Model III of the regression analysis. The variance inflation factor was only 1.55 for Model III. VIF statistics around 10 indicate multicollinearity could be a problem. When a South variable was included in Model III to control for any regional variation in open seat outcomes it proved insignificant. The South variable had a coefficient of .010, a t-statistic of 1.29, and a p-value of .199. These statistics indicate there is no significant regional variation in open seat outcomes.

\textsuperscript{32} In Model III, Republican experience and campaign spending are correlated with the Republican two-party share of the open seat vote by -.293 and -.464 respectively. The Democratic candidate’s political experience and campaign spending variables are correlated with the Republican two-party share of the open seat vote by .336 and .564 respectively. The national factors of prior presidential approval and the policy mood of the electorate are correlated with the Republican two-party share of the open seat vote by a lesser .137 and -.149 respectively.
on open seat contests when national tides resemble tsunamis and presidential approval or the latent policy mood of the electorate shift drastically.

3.6 Conclusion

The goal of Chapter 3 was to test whether open seat election outcomes are influenced more by local factors or national partisan tides within the electorate. The conventional wisdom on open seat elections, also supported by scholarly research on congressional elections, suggested national partisan tides play a larger role in open seat elections. Since the candidates fighting for the open seat usually possess previous political experience and sizable war chests, the national political climate at the time of the open seat election may provide Republicans or Democrats with an electoral advantage in an otherwise equal contest.

Descriptively, this perspective was merited. Open seat contests produced higher partisan turnover (29 percent) than congressional elections involving an incumbent (5.5 percent), and the turnover usually occurred at the expense of the president’s party (68.61 percent to 31.39 percent). Voter dissatisfaction with the incumbent’s president’s party was especially evident in midterm elections.

Statistical analysis supported the idea that the incumbent president’s party suffered greater losses in open seat elections than the out party (H3). Support for the in-party/out-party hypothesis suggests voters hold the incumbent president’s party responsible for national conditions at the time of the open seat election, further bolstering the conventional wisdom that national factors play a larger role than local factors in determining open seat elections.
However, in the final analysis the statistical model presented in this chapter contradicted the conventional wisdom concerning open seat elections. While the candidates vying for the open seat may be more evenly matched in open seat elections than elections involving an incumbent, the composition of the constituency and the relative partisan stability of the of a district usually provides the winning candidate with a comfortable, though not always convincing, margin of victory.

Since the average margin of victory in the 473 open seat elections from 1978-2008 analyzed in this study was over eighteen percent, and wide swings in national conditions only produce a three or four point affect on the two party vote share in open seat elections, ceteris paribus, national conditions appear to only be a decisive factor in close open seat elections.

Hence, the open seat hypothesis (H1), testing the supremacy of national partisan tides over local factors in determining open seat election outcomes was rejected, and the conventional wisdom concerning open seat elections was deemed largely incorrect.

The finding presented in this chapter, that national conditions have a small effect on open seat electoral outcomes corroborates Jacobson’s assertion that open seat electoral outcomes are, “more strongly influenced by partisan trends, both local and national. Without the pull of incumbency, votes are cast more consistently along party lines, so election results reflect state or district partisanship more consistently.”33

While the research presented here also resembles Stimson’s finding, that variation in the policy mood of the electorate projected a six point difference in the electoral outcome, there are important methodological differences between Stimson’s work and the current project that have to be recognized.

For instance, while both works uncover the same variation in the affect of the policy mood (six points) variable on electoral outcomes, Stimson’s result looms larger due to his methodological decision to aggregate House election results by state from election to election.

Stimson concludes, “six points is a great deal where the most extreme variation of state outcome aggregates is between a low (1980) of 49.3 percent and a high (1958) of 61.1 percent.”34 Six points is certainly a large affect when the most extreme variation in aggregated state results is nearly twelve points!

This project on the other hand, did not aggregate congressional election results. Each congressional open seat contest was treated separately, and the average margin of victory was found to be more than eighteen points. The average shift in the policy mood of the electorate from election to election of only three points produces a much smaller affect of merely 1.5 percent. Although the studies cover different time periods (1956-1988 and 1978-2008) Stimson’s decision to aggregate congressional election results by state leads to drastically different results regarding the impact of policy mood on electoral outcomes.

However, despite the small direct effect national conditions may have on open seat elections, national conditions exert enormous indirect influence on congressional open seat elections.

Recalling the “strategic politician” theory advanced by Jacobson and Kernell, national conditions affect candidate emergence and a candidate’s ability to raise campaign funds. More qualified candidates emerge, and find it easier to fill their campaign war chests, when national conditions are favorable and there is a high probability of victory for their party.

The advantaged party will have no trouble finding and funding quality candidates, while the disadvantaged party often pins its electoral prospects on inexperienced and impoverished candidates, with “strategic” candidates opting not to run until conditions (and therefore, their probability of victory) improve.

Hence, national conditions assist in structuring the field of competition, determining the qualifications of the candidates, and the resources brought to bear on electoral outcomes. However, since candidate quality and campaign spending are candidate related aspects of electoral models, the true impact of national conditions on electoral outcomes cannot be accurately assessed through the direct measurement of national-level variables.

Currently, the conventional wisdom, which stresses the influence of national partisan tides on electoral outcomes, fails to consider the indirect role national forces play in the recruitment of, and resources given to, qualified congressional candidates.
However, this oversight may be partially explained by the dull nature of such candidate related discussions.

Charged with the responsibility of informing and entertaining viewers for the sake of profit, network news shows and the pundits that make them popular, opt instead to report how national conditions, and the leaders responsible for those conditions, impact the lives of everyday Americans.
CHAPTER FOUR: SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES?: DISCOVERING THE DETERMINANTS OF CONGRESSIONAL SPECIAL ELECTIONS

4.1 Introduction

The analysis presented in Chapter 3 raised doubts about the conventional wisdom surrounding open seat elections. National factors only appeared to be decisive determinants of open seat outcomes if the open seat election was close. While a litany of scholarly literature on open seat elections corroborated the conventional wisdom about open seat elections, the same can not be said for congressional special elections.

Some scholars see congressional special elections as referenda on the incumbent president, while others find no connection between congressional special election outcomes and approval of the national government.\(^1\) Still, some scholars find congressional special election outcomes to be the product of candidate-constituency factors.\(^2\) In sum, the scant literature on congressional special elections has not bred academic consensus.

With little academic knowledge of congressional special elections to draw upon, pundits interpret the meaning of congressional special elections themselves. Incongruent personal interpretations of congressional special election outcomes were showcased on a broadcast of MSNBC’s Countdown with Keith Olbermann on May 18th,

\(^1\) Sigelman, “Descriptive Generalizations,” asserts the referenda theory, while Fiegert and Norris, “Do By-Elections Constitute Referenda?” find no connection between congressional special election outcomes and approval of the national government.

\(^2\) See Studlar and Sigelman, “A Comparative Prospective,” and Gaddie et al., “What is so Special about Special Elections,” for the candidate-constituency argument.
2010 following Democrat Mark Critz’s victory in the congressional special election being held that night in Pennsylvania’s 12th Congressional District.

Critz’s victory was the seventh straight congressional special election victory by a Democrat since 2008. This string of Democratic success in recent congressional special elections prompted Keith Olbermann to ask veteran political analyst Chris Matthews, “Is there, in fact, anything to a winning streak of special elections? Or is all that—is all the past that is prolog—meaningless prolog because of the change of the political landscape in the last year?” Matthews retorted, “The fact [that the Democrats are] able to hold their base in a working class Pennsylvania district that does like pork, that does earmarking, that does like the federal government is a good sign. It would have been much more important, however, if they had lost.” Matthews continued,

[W]hat the Pennsylvania 12th race shows is that the only route for the Democrats to survive what’s coming is a combination of what Ed Schultz is talking about and what Critz did in Johnstown—which is local, we’re helping you get jobs, this is not about philosophy, this is about meat and potatoes. To the extent that the Democrats can ironically keep this a local election, as opposed to a

---

3 The other victories were in the NY-20th, IL-5th, CA-32nd, CA-10th, NY-23rd, and the Fl-19th congressional districts. However, only the NY-23rd resulted in a gain for the Democrats.
5 Ibid.
nationalized election, the Democrats have a hope of surviving this wave to come. To the extent that it's a nationalized election, that it's about Barack Obama, that it's about philosophy, that it's about the national debt and the deficit and the global economics and all that stuff, the Democrats are going to have their hats handed to them.\textsuperscript{6}

Although Chuck Todd,\textit{ MSNBC}’s White House reporter, indicated the White House will view the congressional special election result with optimism, since, “the national environment is an albatross”, Matthews’ analysis indicates the congressional special election in Pennsylvania’s 12\textsuperscript{th} Congressional District was won on local, not national issues, and would only be imbued with national significance had Critz lost.\textsuperscript{7} Therefore, testing the \textit{congressional special election} hypothesis is the goal of Chapter 4. Rigorous statistical testing will determine which pundit’s perspective is correct. Are congressional special election outcomes more influenced by local factors as Chris Matthews asserts, or are congressional special election outcomes more influenced by the national environment and sweeping partisan tides as Chuck Todd claims?

\section*{4.2 Outline of Chapter}

Chapter 4 proceeds in several sections. Section 4.3 will present descriptive data regarding common control variables employed in congressional research such as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Chuck Todd, interview with Keith Olbermann, \textit{Countdown with Keith Olbermann, MSNBC}, 18 May 2010. Transcript can be found at \url{http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/37233870/ns/msnbc_tv-countdown_with_keith_olbermann/} (accessed July 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2010).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
campaign spending, prior political experience, district demographics, and past presidential vote. With any descriptive patterns in the data detected, Section 4.4 will begin the statistical analysis of congressional special elections.

Section 4.4 tests the *in-party/out-party* hypothesis, uncovering whether the president’s party suffers more in congressional special elections than the out party. If referenda effects are exhibited in congressional special elections, the conventional wisdom concerning the importance of national partisan tides in explaining congressional special election outcomes may be strengthened.

After analyzing the performance of the president’s party in congressional special elections, Section 4.5 tests the *congressional special election* hypothesis via multiple statistical models. The simplest model tests the impact of candidate attributes (money and prior political experience) on open seat election outcomes. The second model adds the attributes of the constituency (demographics and past presidential vote) to the previously estimated candidate model. Finally, the third model introduces national factors to the analysis.

Though this third model is the equation of interest, by introducing the model in segments the relative explanatory power of candidate attributes, constituency dynamics, and national partisan tides on congressional special election outcomes may be easier to gauge. Section 4.6 concludes the statistical analysis of congressional special election outcomes by testing whether congressional special elections are bellwethers for the following presidential election. Section 4.7 presents a conclusion.
4.3 Describing Congressional Special Elections: A Different Animal?

Given that congressional special elections have garnered little academic attention, descriptive statistics may inform our understanding of these isolated, idiosyncratic elections. Table’s 4.1 and 4.2 present descriptive statistics related to candidate attributes (campaign spending and prior elective experience respectively); while Table’s 4.3 and 4.4 highlight the composition of the constituency (district demographics and past presidential vote respectively). Any patterns in the data will highlight the degree to which Republican electoral success in congressional special elections is dependant upon local dynamics as the candidate-constituency model suggests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977-1988</td>
<td>$570,128</td>
<td>$613,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-1999</td>
<td>$766,058</td>
<td>$865,379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2008</td>
<td>$1,261,011</td>
<td>$1,275,678</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Spending is in constant 2008 dollars.
Source: Various FEC reports and editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* provided the data.

Table 4.1 illustrates the difference between average campaign spending in open seat and congressional special elections. Whereas average campaign spending in open seat contests was sizeable, and relatively balanced, candidates in congressional special elections spent less money on average (around $200,000 dollars less in constant 2008 dollars), and the average Democrat always outspent the average Republican. This Democratic spending advantage approached $100,000 per race over the ten year period from 1989-1999!
The fact that congressional special election candidates spent less money on average than their counterparts vying for open seats should come as no surprise. Open seats usually occur through the planning of strategic incumbents. Hence, ambitious candidates excited at the prospect of not having to slay an incumbent have plenty of time to raise funds and plan a campaign strategy.

On the other hand, congressional special elections usually happen under surprising circumstances. A member’s sudden death or their involvement in political scandals is not a planned exit from office. Therefore, congressional special elections tend to occur sporadically and within a short time frame. Under these constraints even a skilled candidate may have trouble greasing the wheels of a campaign and gathering the funds to keep it going. Table 4.2 breaks down the cause of the congressional vacancy for open seats and congressional special elections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2</th>
<th>Cause of Vacancy by Election, 1977-2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open Seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursue Other Office</td>
<td>190 40.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandal</td>
<td>26 5.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retire</td>
<td>226 47.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Defeat</td>
<td>23 4.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>473 100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the death of a member explains less than two percent of open seat vacancies, a member’s sudden passing accounts for slightly more than thirty-eight percent of congressional special election vacancies. While a sizable portion of members left to pursue another office (34.38 percent), scandal accounts for a larger percentage,
and retirement a much smaller percentage of congressional special election vacancies when compared to open seats. This finding bolsters the belief that congressional special elections are often hastily arranged affairs, in turn, limiting a candidate’s ability to amass a large war chest.

In terms of candidate experience, congressional special elections present a similar picture as open seats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Elected Office</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Experience</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48.96%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Legislator</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39.58%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Statewide Office</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Official</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US House</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.04%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Various editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* provided the data

Nearly fifty percent of Republican candidates and forty percent of Democrats running in congressional special elections had no prior experience; while just fewer than forty percent of candidates from both parties had previously served in the state legislature. However, the data shows that more Democratic than Republican candidates previously served in local or statewide office. Combining the variables of campaign spending and prior experience, the Democratic Party appears to field better financed, more experienced, candidates in congressional special elections than the Republican Party.
Like open seat elections, Table 4.4 indicates that as the black population of a district increases Republicans capture fewer congressional special elections. In the fifty-five elections with low minority populations (less than ten percent), Republicans won thirty-three of the contests. In contrast, of the sixteen congressional special elections occurring in districts with heavy minority populations (30 percent or more), Republicans emerged victorious in only four of these contests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Black in District</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>GOP Won</th>
<th>GOP Winning %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1-30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47.92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The appropriate US Census provided the district demographic data

Thus far, the descriptive statistics concerning congressional special elections are not drastically different from those presented in Chapter 3 regarding open seat elections. The fact that congressional special election candidates spend less money than their open seat counterparts can be explained by the unexpected nature and brevity of the congressional special election campaign.

Furthermore, while the statistics suggest the Democratic Party may run better financed, more experienced congressional special election candidates than the Republican Party, this advantage may be overstated.

Just as possessing no electoral experience may be advantageous in anti-incumbency elections like 1994, there is a tradition of widow succession in congressional special elections. Since spouses possess high name recognition, and their nomination avoids
internal disputes within the party and exploits voter sympathy, party officials are quick
to court spouses as candidates and clear the field of potential opposition. Though
spouses usually lack political experience, and in many cases the initial political
ambition that propels people into politics, the constituency’s familiarity with the widow,
and the widow’s promise to continue their spouse’s legacy, usually translates into
victory. The phenomenon of widow succession reminds scholars to treat descriptive
findings with care. Political experience is not always a prerequisite for political success.

Just as in open seat elections, the racial composition of the district affects
Republican electoral success in congressional special elections. Table 4.5 below also
suggests Republican success in congressional special elections is directly tied to the past
performance of Republican presidential nominees in the district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>GOP Won</th>
<th>GOP Winning %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.1-55</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47.92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Normal Vote was calculated as the average vote in the district for
the GOP’s past two presidential candidates

Source: Various editions of The Almanac of American Politics provided the data

---

8 Diane D. Kinkaid, “Over His Dead Body: A Positive Perspective on Widows in the U.S. Congress,”
Western Political Quarterly 31, no. 1 (1978): 96-104.
9 Twelve of the ninety-six congressional special elections analyzed in this study involved spouses, aides,
or relatives running to fill the vacant seat. In nine of the twelve cases the spouse, relative, or aide won the
congressional special election. In two cases, the spouse, relative, or aide lost the general election; and in
one case the spouse (Reuben Spellman) lost the nomination to Steny Hoyer.
Simply put, Republican congressional special election candidates are more successful in districts that have shown strong support for Republican presidential nominees in the past. Republican congressional special election candidates won twenty-five percent of the contests (9 of 36) in districts that demonstrated tepid support (forty-five percent of the vote or less) for past Republican presidential hopefuls. When support for past Republican presidential hopefuls was stronger (more than forty-five percent of the vote), Republican congressional special election candidates won sixty percent of the contests (36 of 60).

Table’s 4.4 and 4.5 portray the same pattern in congressional special elections as those uncovered in open seat elections. The composition of the constituency and the political leanings of the district help explain Republican electoral success in congressional special elections. Republican candidates fighting to fill the congressional vacancy stand a better chance of winning in whiter districts that have demonstrated strong support for Republican presidential candidates in the past. Like open seats, congressional special elections are not immune from the calculations of “strategic” politicians.

Since past presidential support appears crucial to Republican electoral success in congressional special elections, Table 4.6 examines congressional special election outcomes in relation to the district normal vote for president.
Table 4.6 uncovers the same patterns for congressional special elections that were present in the open seat analysis presented in Chapter 3. First, Republican congressional special election candidates ran behind the average district normal vote more often than not (55 cases to 41 cases). Second, Republican candidates won more congressional special elections when they ran ahead of the average district normal vote for president (27 cases), than when they ran behind the average district normal vote for president (18 cases).

Also, regardless of whether the Republican congressional special election candidate ran ahead or behind the average district normal vote for president, the average district normal vote is substantially higher in races the Republican candidate won as compared to those the Republican candidate lost. Hence, the fact that the Republican congressional special election candidate ran behind the average district normal vote for president and won in eighteen cases should not come as a shock; the average district normal vote in these contests was nearly sixty-one percent!
Table 4.6 contains several other patterns as well. Republican congressional special election candidates ran ahead of the average district normal vote and won in close districts at the presidential level. In districts where the Republican congressional special election candidate surpassed the average district normal vote and lost, Republican candidates only ran ahead of the average district normal vote due to previous low levels of support for Republican presidential nominees.

Although, Republican congressional special election candidates ran behind the average district normal vote and lost more often than they won (37 cases to 18 cases), the average margin between the congressional special election outcome and the average district normal vote in these losses was 11.80 percent. Such a wide gap suggests these districts may be more competitive at the presidential level than at the congressional level. Finally, an extremely high level of support for prior Republican presidential nominees explains the ability of Republican congressional special election candidates to run behind the average district normal vote and win.

These patterns lead to three conclusions. First, Republican candidates fighting in the congressional special election benefit the most by running ahead of the president in historically competitive districts at the presidential level. If the district is historically noncompetitive for president, the Republican congressional special election candidate cannot overcome previous low levels of support for Republican presidential nominees. Second, if the Republican congressional special election candidate runs behind the president in historically competitive districts at the presidential level they do so to their detriment. In these contests, Republican congressional special election candidates
average a mere thirty-four percent of the two-party vote in the district. Lastly, Republican congressional special election candidates also benefit from exceedingly high levels of support for previous Republican presidential nominees. Although Republican congressional special election candidates may run behind the average district normal vote in these races, the fact that the district is firmly in the clutches of the Republican Party provides an electoral cushion.

Table 4.6 illustrates one clear point: the standing of Republican presidential nominees in the district is an important indicator of Republican electoral success in congressional special elections. However, the descriptive statistics reveal that congressional special elections, like open seats, are not immune from “strategic” politicians, and presidential pulse in congressional special elections may only appear in truly competitive districts.

Since there also appears to be a presidential pulse to congressional special elections, Table 4.7 investigates another theory commonly connecting the presidency to congressional elections, referenda effects. If referenda effects exist, the bulk of the partisan turnover in congressional special elections should come at the expense of the president’s party. The results are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Seats…</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lost by Party</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost by Incumbent From President's Party</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>77.78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.7 presents compelling evidence of referenda effects in congressional special elections. Partisan turnover is prevalent in congressional special elections. From 1977-2008, 28 percent of congressional special election contests resulted in partisan turnover. This is an increase over the 21.3 percent reported in Sigelman’s initial research. In contrast, only 5.5 percent of seats held by an incumbent changed partisan hands.

Second, though the Democratic Party lost a few more seats to the opposing party than the Republicans, the lion’s share of the losses in congressional special elections came at the expense of the president’s party. Fully ninety-one percent of Republican congressional special election losses occurred under Republican presidents; nearly sixty-nine percent of Democratic partisan turnover occurred under Democratic presidents. Overall, nearly seventy-eight percent (21 seats of 27) of congressional special election losses came at the expense of the incumbent president’s party.

4.3.1 Summary

These findings lead to one conclusion: partisan turnover occurs much more rapidly in congressional special elections (28 percent) than in elections with an incumbent (5.5 percent). When turnover does occur, it is usually at the expense of the president’s party (77.77 percent to 22.23 percent). These statistics follow the same pattern uncovered in Sigelman’s initial analysis of congressional special elections. Section 4.4 subjects multiple statistical models to scrutiny, testing whether the president’s party endures more electoral hardship in congressional special elections than the out-party.
4.4 Do Congressional Special Elections Cost the In-Party?

The descriptive statistics presented above suggest Republican success in congressional special elections depends on the demographics of the individual district and past presidential voting behavior. Whiter districts that exhibit high levels of support for past Republican presidential nominees present the best opportunity for Republican success in congressional special elections.

However, similar to open seat contests, Table 4.7 demonstrates the presidential pulse in congressional special elections is a double-edged sword. While presidential coattails may help sweep congressional special election candidates from the president’s party into office, congressional special elections may also act as electoral evaluations of the party in government, disproportionately affecting the president’s party.

Table 4.8 below presents three regression models to explain the president’s party’s performance in congressional special elections. The first model is a simple bivariate regression estimate of the relationship between the president’s party’s vote and whether the outgoing incumbent was of the president’s party. The second model controls for the party of the incumbent president and the president’s share of the district vote in the last election. The third model introduces controls for the political experience of the president’s and opposition party’s candidates competing in the congressional special election. The results are presented below.
Table 4.8 President’s Party’s Performance in Special Elections, 1977-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party is Incumbent</td>
<td>15.63***</td>
<td>11.657***</td>
<td>9.790***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.789)</td>
<td>(2.946)</td>
<td>(2.857)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican President</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.057</td>
<td>4.567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.536)</td>
<td>(3.549)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party % Last Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.190)</td>
<td>(0.190)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party Exp</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.661**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out Party’s Experience</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-3.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.492)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>36.66***</td>
<td>20.279***</td>
<td>20.716***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.091)</td>
<td>(7.250)</td>
<td>(7.453)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.365</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the president's party's share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election.

As the results in Table 4.8 illustrate, the prior control of the district goes far in explaining the vote share of the president’s party in congressional special elections. The prior incumbency variable by itself (Model I) explains nearly twenty-five percent of the variance in the dependent variable and holds significance across two multivariate equations. These results are nearly identical to those presented in Table 3.7 in the open seat analysis.
However, Model I is where the similarities stop. When presidential control variables are added (Model II) the effect of the prior incumbency variable and the constant are decreased, and the explanatory power of the model improves incrementally.\textsuperscript{10} Whereas open seat elections were heavily influenced by presidential level effects, the same cannot be said for congressional special elections. The performance of Republican congressional special election candidates is not statistically influenced by which party occupies the Oval Office or the president’s performance in the last election. Hence, congressional special elections are not the result of negative referenda effects.

Adding variables to control for candidate experience (Model III) also increases the overall fit of the presidential performance model and highlights another difference between the presidential performance models in open seat and congressional special elections.\textsuperscript{11}

While political experience was statistically significant for both candidates in the presidential performance model for open seat elections presented in Chapter 3, ultimately working to the advantage of the out-party, the opposite is true in congressional special elections. In congressional special elections, possessing prior political experience only benefits the candidate representing the president’s party;

\textsuperscript{10} 95 cases were analyzed in Models II and III because the past presidential vote was not available for the congressional special election in Washington’s Seventh Congressional District to replace Brock Adams in 1977.
\textsuperscript{11} Multicollinearity was not an issue in the in-party/out-party model. The variance inflation factor was only 1.32 for Model III. VIF statistics around 10 indicate multicollinearity could be a problem.
providing that candidate with an additional 8.6 percent of the congressional special
election vote share, ceteris paribus.

Though the presidential performance model performs relatively poorly for
congressional special elections when compared to the same model estimated for open
seat elections (explaining roughly twenty percent less of the variance in the dependent
variable for congressional special elections), the respective presidential performance
models tell drastically different stories which are summarized below.

4.4.1 Summary

While the out-party is advantaged in open seat elections (particularly under
Republican presidents), Table 4.8 suggests that in congressional special elections, the
candidate representing the president’s party is advantaged. This is apparent by the fact
that only the prior incumbency and the president’s party’s experience variables are
statistically significant. Furthermore, since the dummy variable denoting the party of
the president is not statistically significant, the in-party advantage exists regardless of
which party controls the presidency. In sum, since there are some benefits associated
with the sitting president, referenda effects do not dominate congressional special
election outcomes. This finding is bolstered by the fact that when the presidential
approval variable is appended to the in-party/out-party model it does not approach
statistical significance or drastically alter the previously estimated coefficients.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} The results of this analysis can be found in the appendix (see Table 4.8b).
The fact that congressional special election candidates benefit through their partisan affiliation with the sitting president flies in the face of the conventional wisdom. According to the in-party/out-party model, congressional special election outcomes are not the result of referenda effects directed against the party of the incumbent president. Although the referenda frame may generate partisan enthusiasm, calling on disgruntled voters to “throw the bums out”, and easily allow pundits and viewers alike to assess blame for current national conditions, the framing of congressional special elections as the result of referenda effects is incorrect.

Therefore, the in-party/out-party hypothesis (H3) testing for referenda effects has to be rejected in the context of congressional special elections. This striking finding is the first noticeable difference between open seat and congressional special elections to be discovered in this analysis. If congressional special election outcomes are not the result of referenda effects, the importance of local and national factors in determining congressional special election outcomes remains to be investigated. The determinants of congressional special elections are discussed below in Section 4.5.

4.5 Testing the Congressional Special Election Hypothesis

The results presented in Table 4.8 reveal that congressional special election outcomes are not the result of referenda effects directed against the incumbent president. Not only does this finding cast doubt on Sigelman’s initial portrayal of congressional special election outcomes, the results from Table 4.8 also call into question the conventional wisdom concerning the national importance pundits often attribute to congressional special election outcomes.
However, the post election analysis provided by Chris Matthews and Chuck Todd following the congressional special election in Pennsylvania’s 12th Congressional District illustrates that not all pundits endorse the conventional wisdom surrounding congressional special elections.

While Chuck Todd indicated the White House will view the congressional special election through a national lens, Chris Matthews was quick to suggest the outcome rested on local issues, not national partisan tides. Therefore, Section 4.5 compares the conventional wisdom on congressional special elections against the scant political science literature regarding congressional special elections. In Section 4.5 the congressional special election hypothesis will be validated or rejected, and the conventional wisdom surrounding congressional special elections will either be strengthened or weakened.

Table 4.9 below presents three regression models aimed at parsing out the determinants of the Republican candidate’s performance in congressional special elections. The first model only addresses the candidate resources argument. Model I tests the degree to which candidate spending and prior political experience influences congressional special election outcomes. Model II adds controls to account for district demographics and the district normal vote for past Republican presidential nominees. Hence, Model II lays out the traditional candidate-constituency model that dominates current congressional elections research.

Model III then adds controls for presidential approval, and the national policy mood of the electorate at the time of the congressional special election. If the conventional
wisdom is correct, and congressional special elections are dictated by national partisan tides, the presidential approval and policy mood variables should reach statistical significance. Since congressional special elections occur sporadically at any point during the year, the midterm variable was dropped from the congressional special election models to be estimated. The results are presented below.\footnote{On page 51, in footnote 10 of \textit{Elections to Open Seats}, the authors claim that logging the candidate spending variables left the coefficients unchanged and \textit{decreased} the overall fit of the model. Since this analysis logs the candidate spending variables, Gaddie’s congressional special election model estimating the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in congressional elections can be found in the appendix (see Table 4.9b). While the candidate spending variable is drastically different, Gaddie’s model performs slightly better in comparison to the model advanced in this analysis.}
### Table 4.9 Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections, 1977-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Exp</td>
<td>4.589</td>
<td>3.855</td>
<td>3.534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.879)</td>
<td>(2.453)</td>
<td>(2.490)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Exp</td>
<td>-2.754</td>
<td>-4.039</td>
<td>-4.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.964)</td>
<td>(2.788)</td>
<td>(2.692)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Spending (In$)</td>
<td>5.332***</td>
<td>3.637**</td>
<td>3.411*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.189)</td>
<td>(1.716)</td>
<td>(1.772)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Spending (In$)</td>
<td>-5.139***</td>
<td>-4.428***</td>
<td>-4.074**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.411)</td>
<td>(1.620)</td>
<td>(1.696)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.239*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
<td>(0.135)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.249</td>
<td>0.288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.199)</td>
<td>(0.215)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval (Oct.)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.220*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td>(0.108)</td>
<td>(0.121)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>43.539***</td>
<td>43.829**</td>
<td>51.901**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14.747)</td>
<td>(17.534)</td>
<td>(21.441)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>0.537</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the Republican share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election.
The regression results suggest that congressional special elections operate differently than their open seat counterparts. While both candidate experience and candidate spending were highly statistically significant in Model I of the open seat analysis, only the candidate spending variables approach similar levels of significance in Model I of the congressional special elections analysis. Whether a candidate possesses prior political experience does not affect congressional special election outcomes. This finding is bolstered by the fact that candidate experience remains statistically insignificant across Model’s II and III.

Again, the fact that the experience variables are not statistically significant should not come as a surprise. Congressional special elections occur sporadically, and according to the descriptive statistics, are usually precipitated by unforeseen events. The unanticipated nature of congressional special election vacancies makes them less subject to the planning of “strategic” politicians. Inexperienced candidates hoping to secure the “sympathy vote” such as widows or congressional aides may be better positioned to seek the seat following a member’s death; while only foolish, often inexperienced candidates would eagerly seek out vacancies tainted by the scandalous behavior of the previous incumbent.

Aside from the fact that many of the variables are not statistically significant, and therefore, do not help explain congressional special election outcomes, the congressional special elections models consistently explain less of the variance in the dependent variable than the open seat models estimated in Chapter 3.
Model I explains roughly ten percent less of the variance in the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in congressional special elections than the similar model estimated for open seat contests. Furthermore, the full congressional special election model (Model III) explains roughly eighteen percent less of the variance in the dependent variable than the corresponding open seat model. In sum, while statistical models may inform our understanding of open seat election outcomes, they perform poorly when applied to congressional special election contests.

Although the congressional special election models estimated above indicate the importance of candidate spending in these impromptu congressional contests, the models tell us little more than that. While adding variables to account for the demographics and political dynamics of the constituency (Model II) increases the explanatory power of the model slightly, these variables lack statistical significance.

Therefore, the affect of district demographics and the political partisanship of the constituency in determining congressional special election outcomes cannot be discussed with any statistical certainty in Model II. The standard candidate-constituency model that dominates current congressional elections research fails to adequately explain seemingly aberrant congressional special elections.

When national level variables are added to the equation (Model III), none of the national variables are statistically significant, and the explanatory power of the model
actually decreases!\textsuperscript{14} Clearly, congressional special election outcomes are not affected by national partisan tides.\textsuperscript{15}

Interestingly, when the full congressional special election model is estimated (Model III), the Hispanic coefficient reaches statistical significance. Furthermore, it is \textit{positively} associated with the Republican vote share in congressional special elections. According to Model III, for every ten percent of Hispanic’s living in the district, the Republican candidate’s vote share increases by about 2.4 percent, ceteris paribus.\textsuperscript{16} This finding contradicts the longstanding conventional wisdom concerning the voting behavior of Hispanics. However, the 1989 congressional special election in Florida’s

\textsuperscript{14} Multicollinearity was not an issue in Model III of the congressional special election regression analysis. The variance inflation factor was only 1.68 for Model III. VIF statistics around 10 indicate multicollinearity could be a problem. When a South variable was included in Model III to control for any regional variation in congressional special election outcomes it proved insignificant. The South variable had a coefficient of .012, a t-statistic of .39, and a p-value of .699. These statistics indicate there is no significant regional variation in congressional special election outcomes.

\textsuperscript{15} The hc3 command was appended to the regressions in the congressional special elections analysis. The command is commonly used when analyzing small samples (N <250). For a discussion of controlling for small samples see J. Scott Long and Laurie H. Ervin, “Heducedasticity Consistent Standard Errors in the Linear Regression Model: Small Sample Considerations” Working Paper (1998): 24. It can be found at [http://www.indiana.edu/~jslsoc/files_research/testing_tests/hccm/98TAS.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~jslsoc/files_research/testing_tests/hccm/98TAS.pdf) (accessed June 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2010).

\textsuperscript{16} When an alternative model is calculated using the president’s \textit{actual} October approval rating (unstandardized to account for the president’s party), and additional variables are added to account for the party of the incumbent president, along with some interaction effects, the results differ slightly from those presented in Table 4.9. In the alternative model, the Democrat Experience variable is statistically significant; however, Republican campaign spending is no longer significant. Furthermore, the impact of Democratic spending is reduced in the alternative model, while the impact of Hispanic is slightly increased. Lastly, in the alternative model, District Normal Vote is now larger than previously estimated and statistically significant. The alternative model also explains 59.2 percent of the variance in the dependent variable, an improvement of 5.5 percent over model 4.9 presented above. The alternative model is presented in the appendix (see Table 4.9c).
18th Congressional District demonstrates the importance of district demographics in determining electoral outcomes.\(^\text{17}\)

### 4.5.1 Claude Pepper: Death and Demographics

Hospitalized since April 6th citing stomach cancer, Claude Pepper died on May 30th, 1989 at Walter Reed Army Hospital. The Congressman was 88 years-old.\(^\text{18}\) First elected to the Senate in 1936, Pepper was a stalwart supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation. Defeated after only one term in the Senate, Pepper would return to Washington in 1962 representing Florida’s newly created 3rd Congressional District.

Pepper spent his career advocating for the elderly, a substantial population within the Miami based district. Named chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging in 1977, Pepper became known as “Mr. Social Security” for his passionate defense of Social Security and Medicare.\(^\text{19}\) With 30% of his district over the age of 65, Pepper’s reputation as a champion of the elderly ensured his reelection; routinely capturing 70% or more of the vote in the 1980’s.\(^\text{20}\) However, as Pepper lay in state in the Capitol rotunda, the changing state of the now 18th Congressional District threatened the Democratic Party’s hold on the seat.

\[^{17}\text{In the Claude Pepper case study presented below it is important to note that although the reporters covering the race often mentioned Hispanics and Cubans in the same breath, the two groups demonstrate distinctly different voting patterns. Cubans vote much more Republican due to the long history of the Castro regime in Cuba. Hispanics (non-Cubans), vote considerably more Democratic than their Cuban counterparts. The author made every effort to distinguish between the two groups, but since much of the material came from sources that did not draw a similar distinction, a footnote seemed appropriate. Furthermore, the census figures for the composition of Florida’s 18th Congressional District did not differentiate between the percent Hispanic and the percent Cuban residing in the district.}\]


\[^{19}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{20}\text{Ibid.}\]
When Pepper was first elected in 1962, Florida’s 18th Congressional District was composed primarily of white elderly retirees. Yet, over the course of his 27 year career the influx of immigrants transformed Pepper’s district from overwhelmingly Jewish and Democratic, to increasingly Cuban and more conservative. Careful to appease the growing Cuban population in his district, Pepper argued against normalizing relations with Cuba and was a staunch supporter of aiding Nicaraguan rebels. His iconic status in Florida politics insulating him from a serious electoral foe, Pepper’s passing presented the Republican Party with a great opportunity to capture his seat given the demographic shift occurring within the district.

While Pepper’s incumbency advantage may have obscured the ethnic overhaul taking place in his district, the shifting demographics favored the GOP. Hispanics comprised 37 percent of the district’s voting age population; and nearly 70 percent of the Hispanic population in the district were registered Republicans. Furthermore, Democratic registration in the district had fallen from 72 percent a decade ago, to 54 percent in 1989. While such statistics usually provide rudimentary information to the reader, the conduct of the campaign, comments of the candidates, and voting behavior of the various constituencies within Florida’s 18th Congressional District, indicate this congressional special election can be explained by ethnic divisions and demographic shifts.

21 Ibid.
The increased influence of Hispanics in Florida’s 18<sup>th</sup> Congressional District was evident on June 13<sup>th</sup>, when in a speech the chairman of the Republican National Committee, Lee Atwater remarked that Pepper’s seat, “belongs to a Cuban American.”<sup>24</sup> This seemingly inconsequential remark, possibly intended to prop up the Republican candidates, both of whom were Cuban-Americans, had the unintended consequence of inflaming entrenched ethnic divisions present in the constituency. These divisions, not policy discussions, would dominate the campaign.

The prohibitive favorite to win the August 1<sup>st</sup> Republican primary was Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Cuban born State Senator who had served in the Florida Legislature since 1982.<sup>25</sup> She would receive token opposition from Carlos Perez, a once destitute Cuban immigrant who built a multimillion dollar banana importing business. Possessing political experience, and obtaining the endorsement of Xavier Suarez, Miami’s first Cuban born Mayor, Ros-Lehtinen would easily secure the Republican nomination, garnering 80% of the vote.<sup>26</sup>

Sensing an uphill battle in the general election, the Democratic Party sought to build a consensus around a candidate and avoid a divisive primary. To achieve this goal, party officials asked potential candidates to withhold announcing their candidacy until the

---

<sup>24</sup> Adela Gooch, “Ethnic Divisions Dominate Florida’s House Race”.
<sup>26</sup> “Florida Primary Won By a Cuban-American,” <i>New York Times</i>, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1989.
results of a poll indicating which Democrat stood the best chance of retaining the seat could be examined.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite not seeing the poll results, State Senator Jack Gordon could not wait for campaign season to commence, telling the \textit{Miami Herald}, he was, “99\% certain” he would run regardless of the poll results.\textsuperscript{28} Politicians and analysts agreed Gordon would be a formidable candidate. Sergio Bendixen, a veteran political consultant analyzing the race for WLTV-Channel 23, a Spanish language station in south Florida spoke highly of Gordon’s possible candidacy, saying, “If Gordon runs he’ll have no problem getting the nomination, Martinez and Kennedy won’t take him on…Given the demographics of the Democratic Party, they know a Cuban American has no chance against him in a Democratic primary.”\textsuperscript{29} Even Van Poole, Chairman of the Florida Republican Party, recognized Gordon’s appeal, saying, “We think this is Jack Gordon’s seat to lose. He is very closely attached to Pepper, and they’re going to run this campaign that way, that this is Claude Pepper’s memorial seat.”\textsuperscript{30} Gordon appeared to be the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination.

Although Gordon was akin to Pepper in many ways, Gordon’s opposition to aiding the Nicaraguan rebels angered many Cubans and dealt his candidacy a severe electoral blow. The poll the Democratic Party had been waiting for proved Gordon polled horrible among Hispanics and would get hammered in a head-to-head race against

\footnotesize{
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Barry Klein, “Politics after Pepper”.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\normalsize}
Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. True to his word, Gordon pressed on despite his lackluster showing.

With the primary campaign in full swing, Jack Gordon, once thought to be the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, withdrew from the race. Saying he could not stomach a negative campaign that pits Jews, Cubans, and blacks against one another, Gordon’s retreat came a day after Lee Atwater stated his top priority was to see the seat vacated by Pepper filled by a Cuban American. Denouncing Atwater’s statement as, “inflammatory, outrageous, and irresponsible” Gordon said, “We don’t need somebody throwing matches at our tinderbox.”

Atwater’s comment fueled ethnic tensions, and as Sergio Bendixen pointed out, “Miami is very ethnically divided and very sensitive. If the Republicans portray this race as the Cuban-Americans chance to take over, there could easily be an anti-Cuban backlash.” However, the first signs of ethnic infighting affected the Democratic, not the Republicans Party.

Jack Gordon’s abrupt exit from the Democratic primary created a void quickly filled by at least seven other candidates. Rosario Kennedy, a Cuban born Miami City Commissioner, Claude Pepper’s niece, Jo-Ann, and attorney Gerald Richman were considered the top contenders for the Democratic nomination.

---

31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Barry Klein, “Politics after Pepper”. 

124
Claiming Atwater’s controversial comment, “polarized this community” Democrat Gerald Richman’s campaign chairman, Brian Lunde, defended Richman’s campaign theme that Pepper’s seat was an, “American seat.” Lunde said, “This isn't an Anglo seat, it isn't a Jewish seat, it isn't a Cuban-American seat. It's an American seat. It belongs to all the people.” While Richman claimed the slogan was meant to, “unite the community” it quickly drew the criticism of local media and condemnation from the Dade County Fair Electoral Practices Commission. The Miami Herald, calling the slogan, “naked, deliberate, bigotry” endorsed Rosario Kennedy.

The divisive primary the Democratic Party hoped to avoid was on full display, when in a final push to capture votes Rosario Kennedy claimed Richman defended an Iraqi arms dealer known as the Merchant of Death and also lambasted Jo-Ann Pepper as a lightweight. With all the votes counted Gerald Richman would wrestle the lead away from Kennedy, winning the August 1st primary by a margin of 146 votes, necessitating an August 15th runoff.

Although Kennedy successfully courted the Hispanic vote, Richman scored big among the elderly in Miami Beach, leaving Pepper and two other black candidates to split the black vote. The first round of voting was seemingly decided on the ethnic divisions present in the constituency. In an effort to expand any coalitions within the

36 Adela Gooch, “Ethnic Divisions Dominate Florida’s House Race”.
37 Ibid.
38 “Lawyer Easily Wins Nomination”.
40 “Lawyer Easily Wins Nomination”.
41 Ibid.
constituency, Jo-Ann Pepper and the two black candidates backed Kennedy. Nonetheless, following the two week campaign, Gerald Richman would emerge scarred but victorious, beating Rosario Kennedy 61 percent to 39 percent.42

Heading into the general election the Democratic Party had plenty to worry about. A divisive primary decided on demographic and ethic differences illustrated the importance of ethnicity in explaining electoral outcomes. If these voting blocs persisted, Charles Cook’s statement that, “For years I’ve heard Democrats say that once Pepper leaves that seat, it’s a goner” may come true.43 The migration of Cubans into Florida’s 18th Congressional District over the years, would give Ileana Ros-Lehtinen an electoral advantage. Furthermore, the Cuban born Ros-Lehtinen also stood to benefit from her own ethnicity, because as Rosario Kennedy noted, “Cubans will go for the Cuban if there is only one in the race.”44

If Richman was going to overcome Ros-Lehtinen’s ethnic advantage, he had to pull in a myriad of voters. Not only did Richman need the strong support of the traditionally Democratic black and Jewish communities, according to Sergio Bendixen Richman, “also needed to attract a majority of the voters who are not black, Jewish, or Cuban-American.”45

Even if this coalition of support could be assembled, voters still had to turnout, since pollster Robert L. Joffee said, “Cuban-American turnout is routinely 5 percent to 20

42 Ibid.
44 Chris Black, “Florida Race Fuels Cuban-American Pride”.
45 Barry Klein, “Politics after Pepper”.

126
percent above non-Cuban voter turnout.” Reasoning that, “Cuban-American[s] take [the vote] a lot more seriously than others because we lost our homeland. We cherish the vote and we use it,” Ileana Ros-Lehtinen knew she could count on heavy turnout among Florida’s 18th Congressional District’s Cuban community. Presented with the opportunity to elect the first Cuban member of Congress, the Cuban community would certainly flock to the polls on election-day.

While President George W. Bush campaigned for the Republican, charges that Richman won the nomination by running an ethnically divisive campaign left the Democratic Party in disarray. Richman’s opponent, Rosario Kennedy refused to endorse him, and soon Ros-Lehtinen also accused the Democrat of running a divisive campaign. Jeb Bush, the president’s second son, and Ros-Lehtinen’s campaign manager, said, “We haven’t been through one of these campaigns, where a guy used a tactic which others have described as a racist tactic. I don’t think you can sustain it.” Richman’s slogan, that Peppers seat was an, “American seat” was getting him in hot water again.

Despite the fact that the “American seat” remark was uttered by Lee Atwater, a Republican, it succeeded in tearing apart the Democratic Party. Jeb Bush, admitting that Atwater should not have uttered the remark, faulted Richman for exploiting it. While the slogan was meant to unify the community according to the Richman campaign, Ros-Lehtinen took it as an affront, and refused to debate the Democrat throughout the

---

46 Chris Black, “Florida Race Fuels Cuban-American Pride”.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
campaign, saying, “I will not dignify the bigoted campaign of Gerald Richman by appearing with him in any forum or debate. Bigotry is not debatable. As the father of a racist campaign, Gerald Richman must campaign alone.”

While Richman claimed the Republican was afraid to have her ability to debate or her issues exposed, the fact of the matter was in this congressional special election issues were relegated to the background.

Although the candidates disagreed on a number of important issues like abortion (Ros-Lehtinen opposing, Richman supporting), English as the official language (Ros-Lehtinen opposing, Richman supporting), and gun control (Ros-Lehtinen supporting a three day waiting period, Richman, a seven day waiting period and a ban on assault rifles), according to polls, ethnicity trumped issue positions in a voter’s decision of which candidate to support.

Although a majority of voters in Florida’s 18th Congressional District favored abortion rights, Cuban-Americans who did so favored Ros-Lehtinen to the tune of 95 percent to 5 percent. Other polls also found that regardless of party affiliation 28 out of every 29 Cuban-Americans said they would vote for Ros-Lehtinen, while 24 out of every 25 Jewish voters backed Richman. With such entrenched, ethnically divided support, and polls showing the candidates tied with 45 percent of the vote each, with 10 percent undecided, the race came down to turnout, and in particular black turnout

51 Adela Gooch, “Ethnic Divisions Dominate Florida’s House Race”.
(estimated at 19 percent of the district’s voting-age population). Although Richman performed poorly among blacks in the Democratic primary, Gerald Richman’s success in the general election hinged on heavy black turnout on election-day.

When all the votes were counted, Florida’s 18th Congressional District was sending the first Cuban-American to Congress. The Republican, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen defeated Gerald Richman 52.3 percent to 47.7 percent. Winning by a slim 4,566 vote margin, the voting followed ethnic lines. Ros-Lehtinen captured nearly 85 percent of the Hispanic vote, 13 percent of the Anglo vote, and only 3 percent of the black vote. While Richman cleaned up among Anglos and blacks as expected, only 40 percent of Anglos and 34 percent of blacks turned out to the polls. Conversely, 58 percent of Hispanics turned out to vote, with turnout skyrocketing to 75 percent in Little Havana. District-wide, an amazing 51 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the special election to replace Claude Pepper.

While overall turnout was an astonishing 51 percent, the decisive factor in explaining this congressional special election outcome was the ethnic divide present in the constituency, and their varying degrees of support. A divisive campaign, and the conduct of the candidates, exploited the ethnic divide and the demographic shift that had been occurring during Claude Pepper’s tenure in Congress. Presented with the

53 Adela Gooch, “Ethnic Divisions Dominate Florida’s House Race”.
55 Ibid.
56 Jeanne DeQuine and Bob Minzesheimer, “GOP Candidate Wins in Miami” USA Today, August 30th, 1989
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
opportunity to elect a Cuban-American to Congress upon Claude Pepper’s passing, Cuban-Americans flocked to the polls in much greater numbers than Anglo’s or blacks on election-day, sending Ileana Ros-Lehtinen to Congress as a result. Demographics, not debates, ethnicity, not issues, decided this congressional special election.  

4.5.2 Summary

Since only the candidate spending variables and the percentage of Hispanic’s living in the district are statistically significant in Model III, the congressional special elections hypothesis (H2) was validated. Congressional special election outcomes are impacted by candidate and constituency factors, not national partisan tides. This finding, illustrated in the case study above, casts doubt on the widely accepted conventional wisdom regarding the determinants of congressional special elections. As Chris Matthews correctly asserted, congressional special elections are more often local, not national contests.

While Tip O’Neill’s adage that, “all politics is local” rings true for congressional elections in general, congressional special elections appear to take this belief to the extreme. Whereas national conditions only exerted a marginal direct impact on open seat elections (and may operate indirectly through candidate-level effects as well), congressional special elections appear wholly unaffected by national conditions. A fuller discussion postulating the reason for this difference is taken up in Chapter 5.
While one aspect of the conventional wisdom concerning congressional special elections has proven false, congressional special election outcomes may still hold national significance if they appear to be bellwethers for future electoral behavior. Section 4.6 tests whether congressional special election outcomes are bellwethers for forecasting the following presidential election. If congressional special elections act as a political weathervane, indicating which way the political winds are blowing among the electorate, support for the Republican congressional special election candidate should also translate into support for the Republican presidential nominee in the following presidential election.

4.6 Do Congressional Special Elections Foretell the Future?

Before revealing whether congressional special elections are early indicators of voting behavior in the following presidential election, any alterations made to the previously estimated models need to be made clear.

First, to test whether congressional special elections are electoral bellwethers for the following presidential election the dependent variable was altered from the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election to the Republican presidential nominee’s share of the two-party vote in the district in the following presidential election.

Since there may be a lag between the congressional special election and the following presidential election, a proximity variable, measuring the number of days that elapse between the congressional special election and the following presidential election, has also been added to the models presented below.
Also, since the models below measure the affect of congressional special election voting behavior on voting behavior in the following presidential election, variables controlling for the effects of the congressional candidate’s level of spending and prior political experience were removed from the equation. There is no reason to believe these congressional level controls would influence voting behavior in presidential elections.

Table 4.10 below presents three regression models aimed at determining whether congressional special elections are early indicators of voting behavior in the following presidential election. The first model tests the degree to which congressional special election outcomes, and the proximity of the congressional special election to the following presidential election, influences presidential voting behavior. Model II adds controls to account for district demographics and the district normal vote for past Republican presidential nominees.

Model III then adds controls for presidential approval, and the national policy mood of the electorate at the time of the congressional special election.

If the conventional wisdom is correct, and congressional special election outcomes are early indicators of voting behavior in the following presidential election, the Republican candidate’s share of the two-party vote in congressional special elections should reach statistical significance. The results are presented below.
Table 4.10 Regression Estimates of Republican Presidential Candidate's Vote
Share via Special Elections, 1977-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Special Election Vote</td>
<td>0.441***</td>
<td>0.195*</td>
<td>0.201*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.124)</td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dem. Special Election Vote</td>
<td>-0.182</td>
<td>-0.136</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.120)</td>
<td>(0.126)</td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.108)</td>
<td>(0.122)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.481***</td>
<td>0.686***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.122)</td>
<td>(0.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Oct.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-1.337***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.365)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>-0.126</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>0.120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.127)</td>
<td>(0.122)</td>
<td>(0.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>38.532***</td>
<td>22.194*</td>
<td>82.100***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.767)</td>
<td>(12.034)</td>
<td>(18.791)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>0.488</td>
<td>0.577</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the Republican presidential candidate's share of the two-party vote in the following presidential election.
As the results in Table 4.10 illustrate, voting behavior in congressional special election contests goes far in explaining voting behavior in the following presidential election. Model I explains nearly thirty-seven percent of the variance in the dependent variable and the Republican share of the congressional special election vote holds significance across two multivariate equations. However, the proximity of the congressional special election to the presidential contest appears insignificant. Therefore, congressional special elections that occur closer to the general election are not more predictive of the presidential election outcome than congressional special elections that happen months before the presidential election.61

When variables accounting for district demographics and the district normal vote are added (Model II), the affect of the Republican congressional special election vote share and the constant decrease dramatically, and the explanatory power of the model improves by more than ten percent. Furthermore, the district normal vote for president, a measure of district partisanship, proves to be significant. For every one percent of past support given to Republican presidential nominees, the following Republican presidential hopeful can count on .48 percent of the district vote.62

Adding variables to control for presidential approval and the policy mood of the electorate at the time of the congressional special election (Model III) also increases

61 As expected, in Model I the Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election is highly correlated with the Republican (.6139) and Democratic (-.5762) congressional special election candidate’s vote share in the congressional special election.

62 The dependent variable and the coefficients in Model II are also highly correlated. The Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election is highly correlated with the percent of black residents in the district (-.4108) and the district normal vote (.6710). However, the Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election is not highly correlated with the percent Hispanic residing in the district (-.1824).
thee overall fit of the presidential election model. Model III explains about fifty-eight percent of the variance in the Republican presidential nominee’s vote share.\textsuperscript{63}

While the influence of the district normal vote on the following presidential vote jumps from about .48 to .69, unsurprisingly, national factors also influence presidential voting behavior. The policy mood at the time of the congressional special election is statistically significant. For every one point increase in the policy mood of the electorate (signifying a more liberal policy mood) the Republican presidential nominee can expect to lose about 1.34 percent of the district vote.\textsuperscript{64}

4.6.1 Summary

Table 4.10 demonstrates that congressional special elections may be interpreted as bellwethers for the following presidential election. The conventional wisdom may be correct. Every one percent of the congressional special election vote garnered by the Republican candidate fighting for the congressional vacancy translates into .20 percent of the vote for the Republican presidential nominee in the district. This may seem like a small influence, but when you consider the average Republican vote share in congressional special elections was about forty-six percent of the two-party vote, the congressional special election contest affected the average district-wide presidential vote in the following presidential election by about nine percent.

\textsuperscript{63} In Model III of Table 4.10 the Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election is not highly correlated with either prior presidential approval (.1262) or the policy mood of the electorate (-.2009).

\textsuperscript{64} Multicollinearity was not an issue in Model III of the analysis testing whether congressional special election outcomes can be seen as bellwethers for the following presidential contest. The variance inflation factor was only 2.22 for Model III. VIF statistics around 10 indicate multicollinearity could be a problem.
However, the results presented in Table 4.10 should be read with caution. As footnoted throughout the analysis (see footnotes 61-63), the Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election is heavily correlated with the congressional special election outcome, the racial composition of the constituency, and the district normal vote for president. This begs the question: are congressional special elections really predictive of presidential election outcomes, or are the two electoral outcomes simply products of similar partisan forces that structure both contests?

If an individual’s partisan identification is determined through socialization or identifying group interests, and is also relatively stable (though not immovable) over long periods of time, an individual’s partisan identification should impact both political contests in a similar fashion.\textsuperscript{65} Furthermore, if congressional districts are seen as nothing more than a collection of constituents, each with relatively stable partisan identifications, the voting behavior of many congressional districts can also been seen as relatively stable.

Therefore, the statistical relationship uncovered in Table 4.10 between congressional special election voting behavior and voting behavior in the following presidential election is more than likely the product of the underlying relatively durable partisanship of the constituency, and by extension, the district in both contests.

\textsuperscript{65} For a discussion of the formation of an individual’s political partisan identification see Angus Campbell et al., \textit{The American Voter} (New York: Wiley & Sons Inc, 1960).
For congressional special elections to be true bellwethers of voting behavior in the following presidential election, a better model that isolates the affect of the congressional special election on the presidential election outcome, independent of other variables needs to be conceived. Until a better model can be constructed (perhaps using instrumental variables to reduce the correlation detected in the present model), strong statistical evidence of congressional special elections acting as bellwethers for the following presidential election cannot be presented here and the bellwether hypothesis (H4) must be rejected.

4.7 Conclusion

The goal of Chapter 4 was to test whether congressional special election outcomes are determined more by local factors or national partisan tides. While the political science literature concerning congressional special elections is scant, the conventional wisdom is robust, and suggested congressional special election outcomes were indicative of national partisan tides within the electorate.

Descriptively, the national importance attributed to congressional special election outcomes was validated. Congressional special elections produced higher partisan turnover (28 percent) than congressional elections involving an incumbent (5.5 percent), and the turnover usually occurred at the expense of the president’s party (77.77 percent to 22.23 percent). This finding substantiated Sigelman’s early generalization that congressional special election outcomes do resemble referenda effects on the sitting president.
However, statistical analysis revealed that the president’s party is actually advantaged in congressional special elections, since the prior incumbency and president’s party experience variable are the only controls to reach statistical significance. Therefore, the in-party/out-party hypothesis (H3) testing for referenda effects was rejected for congressional special elections.

Furthermore, since candidate spending and the percentage of Hispanic’s living in the district were the only variables to reach statistical significance, the congressional special elections hypothesis (H2) was validated. Congressional special election outcomes are impacted by candidate and constituency factors, not national partisan tides.

When another facet of the conventional wisdom was tested, there appeared to be evidence that congressional special election outcomes may act as bellwethers for the following presidential election. For every one percent of the two-party vote received by the Republican congressional special election candidate, the Republican presidential nominee can expect .20 percent of the district vote in the following presidential election, ceteris paribus.

However, since Republican presidential candidate’s vote share in the following presidential election was highly correlated with several independent variables in the statistical model it could not be determined whether congressional special election outcomes were truly predictive of the following presidential vote, or whether the result was simply an artifact of partisan stability within the district. Without strong evidence to the contrary, the bellwether hypothesis (H4) must be rejected.
Although congressional special election outcomes may not act as bellwethers for voting behavior in the following presidential election, the analysis in Chapter 4 also showed that congressional special elections are structured by similar forces as open seat elections. When the congressional election data was merged, and a special election variable was added to Model III presented in Table 4.9, the special election variable did not obtain statistical significance. Therefore, the subset hypothesis (H5) could not be rejected. Congressional special elections are not unique when compared to open seat elections.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINAL THOUGHTS

5.1 Goals of Project

The primary goal this research uncovered whether open seat and congressional special election outcomes are more influenced by local factors or national partisan tides. Answering this fundamental question lends clarity to the previously disparate findings presented within the scarce scholarly research devoted to congressional special elections and moves academia one step closer to a consensus regarding the determinants of congressional special election contests.

This research was also designed with two secondary goals in mind. The first tested the validity of common frames employed by the media to interpret open seat and congressional special election outcomes. The second goal tested whether congressional special elections are unique elections governed by unforeseen dynamics.

These goals addressed two additional questions. First, are media pundits correct to imbue open seat and congressional special election outcomes with national significance as they often do? Second, do traditional models used in political science to predict congressional election outcomes apply to congressional special elections research? These three questions produced five testable hypotheses which are summarized below.
5.2 Hypotheses

H1- The *open seat* hypothesis asserted that if the conventional wisdom and political science literature was correct, open seat elections would be more influenced by national conditions and partisan tides (presidential approval and Stimson’s “policy mood”) than by local candidate or constituency factors (experience, spending, demographics, normal vote).

H2- The *congressional special election* hypothesis asserted that if the political science literature was correct, congressional special elections would be more influenced by local candidate or constituency factors (experience, spending, demographics, normal vote) than by national conditions or partisan tides (presidential approval and Stimson’s “policy mood”).

These first two hypotheses focus on the political science literature concerning the determinants of open seat and congressional special election outcomes. Furthermore, these hypotheses answered the primary question that motivated this research: are open seat and congressional special election contests decided primarily by local or national factors? These hypotheses were the subject of Chapter’s 3 and 4 respectively.

The next set of hypotheses tested the validity of the common frames used by the media to interpret open seat and congressional special election outcomes. These hypotheses answered whether media pundits are correct to attribute national significance to open seat and congressional special election outcomes.
H3-The *in-party/out-party* hypothesis asserted that if the conventional wisdom was correct, the president’s party would endure more losses in open seat and congressional special election contests than the party not occupying the presidency.

H4-The *bellwether* hypothesis asserted that if the conventional wisdom concerning congressional special elections was correct, the Republican share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election would be positively associated (and statistically significant) with the Republican presidential candidate’s share of the two-party vote in the district for the *following* presidential election.

The in-party out-party hypothesis was subject to examination in both Chapter 3 examining open seat election outcomes and Chapter 4 dealing with congressional special election outcomes. This choice was made because both open seat and congressional special election outcomes are commonly portrayed by the media as reflecting referenda effects against the incumbent president.

Conversely, the bellwether hypothesis was only subject to investigation in the chapter pertaining to congressional special elections, Chapter 4. While it is plausible to conceive of a string of open seat losses by either the Republicans or the Democrats as bellwethers for macro-partisan concepts such as one party losing control of Congress, this concept was outside the purview of this dissertation.

The last hypothesis to be tested was the *subset* hypothesis.

H5-The *subset* hypothesis asserted that if Gaddie et al. was correct, and congressional special elections are essentially a subset of open seat elections structured by the same forces that influence open seat elections, when the data was merged and the
The final regression analyzed, the special election variable would *not* reach statistical significance.

The subset hypothesis was tested in Chapter 4, and aimed at discovering the uniqueness of congressional special elections, and therefore, the applicability of traditional models used in political science to predict congressional election outcomes to congressional special elections research.

The findings of this research project are presented below. For purposes of readability, the findings are separated by chapter and the hypotheses may not be dealt with in the order presented above.

### 5.3 Chapter 3 Open Seat Findings

The open seat analysis began with an examination of the descriptive data regarding open seat elections. Since any patterns present in descriptive data may motivate more rigorous statistical analysis, digging in data for descriptive patterns is a good place to begin any quantitative analysis. The descriptive statistics revealed that:

a) Partisan turnover occurred much more rapidly in open seat elections (29 percent) than in elections with an incumbent (5.5 percent). Furthermore, turnover in open seat elections occurred more frequently at the expense of the president’s party (68.61 percent to 31.39 percent).

Descriptive patterns present in the open seat elections data provided initial evidence in support of the in-party/out-party hypothesis (H3) for open seat elections. The statistical validity of the in-party/out-party hypothesis was investigated next. Regression analysis revealed that:
b) The in-party did appear to be in trouble in open seat contests. Republican candidates lost an average of five percent at the polls under Republican presidents. On the other hand, the Democratic disadvantage was miniscule, and only occurred when an experience imbalance favored the Republican candidate fighting for the open seat.

Following the statistical analysis the in-party/out-party hypothesis could not be rejected (H3) in open seat elections, lending some credibility to the conventional wisdom concerning the media’s interpretation of open seat election outcomes. Since the in-party was disadvantaged in open seat elections, the media was correct to frame open seat election outcomes as referenda against the incumbent president and attribute national significance to open seat election outcomes.

However, given that the in-party/out-party hypothesis was tested using a model other than the standard candidate-constituency model that motivated this research, the importance of national partisan tides in determining open seat election outcomes could not be determined yet. Testing the open seat hypothesis (H1) via regression analysis showed:

c) The average affect of shifts in October presidential approval was little more than one percent of the vote in open seat elections (and three percent when drastic shifts occur), and shifts in policy mood affected the average open seat contest by a mere 1.5 percent (and four percent when drastic shifts occur).

Since the average margin of victory in the 473 open seat elections from 1978-2008 analyzed in this study was over eighteen percent, and wide swings in national conditions only produced a three or four point affect on the two party vote share in open
seat elections, Chapter 3 concluded that national level factors were only decisive in close open seat elections; registering the greatest impact on open seat contests when national tides resembled tsunamis and presidential approval or the latent policy mood of the electorate shifted drastically.

Hence, the open seat hypothesis (H1) was rejected. Local factors were found to influence open seat election outcomes more than national partisan tides. The conventional wisdom bestowing national significance to open seat election outcomes was also proven incorrect.

However, the findings presented in Chapter 3 are also misleading. To conclude that national conditions only play a marginal part in determining open seat elections is incorrect. National conditions also operate indirectly, affecting the calculus of “strategic” politicians, the field of competition, and the resources given to the respective candidates vying for the open seat.

Hence, the results obtained in Chapter 3, that local factors outweighed national conditions in determining open seat electoral outcomes may have been driven by the fact that the indirect influence of national conditions affected the candidate-level (and local) variables of candidate experience and campaign spending.

5.3.1 Summary

Summarizing the findings, open seat election outcomes were impacted more by local factors than national partisan tides. However, this finding may have been the result of the pervasive indirect influence national factors exerted on open seat elections. When
only measured directly (through prior presidential approval and the policy mood of the electorate) national factors were only decisive in determining close open seat elections.

While open seat elections could be correctly viewed by the media as reflecting referenda effects against the incumbent president, the national importance attributed to open seat elections is largely unwarranted. Until the conventional wisdom recognizes the indirect influence national conditions exert on candidate recruitment and the funding of their campaigns, the conventional wisdom remains incomplete and incorrect.

5.4 Chapter 4 Congressional Special Election Findings

Since very little research had been conducted on congressional special elections over the years and any insight into the dynamics of congressional special elections could prove useful, Chapter 4 began by examining the data descriptively. The descriptive statistics uncovered that:

a) Partisan turnover occurred much more rapidly in congressional special elections (28 percent) than in elections with an incumbent (5.5 percent). When turnover did occur, it usually occurred at the expense of the president’s party (77.77 percent to 22.23 percent).

This pattern of partisan turnover mimicked Sigelman’s early findings. In Sigelman’s analysis of 97 “true” congressional special elections spanning 1954-1978, the partisan turnover rate was found to be 21.3 percent; three times higher than the turnover rate of congressional incumbents during that time.
The research presented in this dissertation of 96 true and concurrent congressional special elections spanning 1978-2008 found the partisan turnover to be 28 percent; five times higher than the turnover rate of congressional incumbents from 1978-2008.

The fact that Sigelman’s generalization withstood the test of time presented a promising start to Chapter 4 and provided initial evidence in support of the in-party/out-party hypothesis (H3) in the context of congressional special elections. The in-party/out-party hypothesis was then subjected to statistical scrutiny via the same model estimated in the open seat analysis. Regression analysis revealed that:

b) Member’s of the president’s party, no matter which party occupied the Oval Office, were actually advantaged in congressional special election contests. Prior control of the congressional seat by a member of the president’s party affected the congressional special election outcome by nearly ten percentage points, ceteris paribus. Fielding an experienced candidate garnered the in-party nearly nine percentage points, ceteris paribus.

Since only the prior incumbency and in-party experience variables reached conventional levels of statistical significance, the in-party hypothesis (H3), testing for the presence of referenda effects was rejected in the context of congressional special elections.

Interpreting congressional special election outcomes as the result of referenda effects directed toward the party of the incumbent president as the earlier research of Sigelman and the conventional wisdom suggested was incorrect.
When congressional special election outcomes were tested using the standard candidate-constituency model that dominates current congressional elections research the congressional special election hypothesis (H2) could not be rejected. Congressional special elections were found to be decidedly local affairs dominated by candidate and constituency factors. Regression analysis revealed:

   c) Campaign spending to be statistically significant, as well as the percent Hispanic living in the district. This analysis determined that for every ten percent of Hispanic’s living in the district, the Republican candidate’s congressional special election vote share increased by about 2.4 percent, ceteris paribus.

   The fact that campaign spending was found to be statistically significant was not surprising. On the other hand, the fact that the percent Hispanic was positively associated with the Republican vote share in congressional special elections contradicted the conventional wisdom surrounding the voting behavior of Hispanics. Unfortunately, the conventional wisdom concerning the determinants of congressional special election outcomes was also contradicted by this analysis. Congressional special elections are distinctly local, not national, affairs despite the frame provided by media pundits.

   Nevertheless, the local nature of congressional special elections has logical explanations. The first deals with the ability of national campaigns to prime national considerations, while the second considers differences within the open seat and congressional special election electorates.
First, whereas open seats are contested every other November amidst a political environment garnering plenty of press attention and publicity, congressional special elections occur sporadically throughout the year and often go unnoticed or unreported by the media.

Therefore, whatever modest influence national conditions have on open seat elections may be a byproduct of the publicity surrounding the normal electoral cycle. However, since congressional special elections can occur throughout the year, isolated from the fervor of a national campaign (and the publicity that accompanies it), national considerations may not be as easily primed in such low information elections.

The inability of congressional special elections to illicit national considerations may also reflect the nature of the electorate that casts ballots in congressional special election contests. If voting is not costless, and congressional special elections are typically low information affairs due to their isolated, idiosyncratic nature, it stands to reason the constituents that vote in congressional special elections are qualitatively different than those that turnout to vote in open seat elections.

Open seat elections take place every two years in an information rich distinctly political environment driven by publicity and pundits. With storylines filling the airwaves informing voters how the election affects their daily life, and information plentiful and easily attainable, more “peripheral voters” (voters that maintain a passing
interest in politics but need an extra push to go to the polls) may turnout in open seat elections.¹

Motivated by the media, and not possessing an immovable partisan identification, national considerations may play a bigger role in the decision making of the “peripheral voter” when deciding which candidate to vote for.

On the other hand, congressional special elections are more likely to be dominated by Campbell’s “core voter” (voters with a strong and enduring interest in politics who habitually vote and form a strong identification with one of the parties). Therefore, the combination of a low information election and strong and enduring partisanship within the electorate allows less room for national considerations to sway the support of the “core voter.” Put simply, the congressional special election electorate may be composed of more committed partisans.

While one aspect of the conventional wisdom concerning congressional special elections was proven inaccurate, congressional special election outcomes would still hold national significance if they were shown to be bellwethers for future electoral behavior. Using the future Republican presidential candidate’s district vote share as the dependent variable, regression analysis discovered that:

d) For every one percent of the congressional special election vote garnered by the Republican candidate fighting for the congressional vacancy, the Republican presidential nominee could expect .20 percent of the district vote.

¹ The definition of a “peripheral voter” was taken from J. Campbell, *The Presidential Pulse*, 2nd ed., 11.
Since the average Republican vote share in congressional special elections was about forty-six percent of the two-party vote, the congressional special election contest influenced the average district-wide presidential vote in the following presidential election by about nine percent. Congressional special elections could be correctly viewed as bellwethers for the following presidential election by the media.

However, since the dependent variable was highly correlated with several of the independent variables in the model, the statistical relationship uncovered in the analysis was more than likely the result of the relatively stable partisanship within the district and its affect on both contests. Until a better model can be designed the bellwether hypothesis (H4) must be rejected.

The subset hypothesis (H5) tested whether open seat and congressional special elections were governed by the same dynamics as the research of Gaddie et al. claimed. After the data was merged, and a congressional special election variable was included in the model used throughout this analysis, the subset hypothesis could not be rejected.

Regression analysis revealed:

e) Congressional special elections were not unique elections governed by unforeseen dynamics.\(^2\) While congressional special elections may be precipitated by different circumstances than open seat elections, traditional models used in political science to predict congressional election outcomes are applicable to congressional special elections research.

---

\(^2\) When the data was merged, and a special election dummy variable was added the variable was not statistically significant. The coefficient attached to the special election variable was -.391. The p-value associated with the special election variable was .648. P-value’s < .10 indicate some level of statistical significance.
5.4.1 Summary

Summarizing the findings, congressional special election outcomes were impacted by local factors, not national partisan tides. Unlike open seat elections, congressional special elections cannot be correctly viewed as reflecting referenda effects against the incumbent president. Nor can congressional special election outcomes be reliably viewed as bellwethers for the following presidential election.

While the findings presented in Chapter 4 improve our understanding of congressional special elections, researching congressional special elections presented some problems. The data limitations and research problems encountered throughout this project are discussed below.

5.5 Research Problems

When this project began, it was surprising to discover that congressional special elections were so scantily researched. Academic interest in congressional special elections consisted of a handful of journal articles and even fewer books or book chapters. After conducting the research for this project, the paucity of previous congressional special elections research can be understood.

Determining the affect of local factors and national partisan tides on open seat and congressional special election outcomes required controlling for a myriad of candidate-specific, constituency related, and national factors. Therefore, the need to control for candidate factors such as campaign spending limited the analysis to 1977-2008. Prior to passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 candidates were not required to
disclose campaign contributions, making it difficult to obtain accurate campaign spending data prior to the 1970’s.

Although this temporal constraint was necessary, only 118 congressional special elections occurred from 1977-2008. Accounting for shifting district boundaries and the presence of third parties (see Decision Rules in Chapter 2) further reduced the congressional special elections dataset to ninety-six cases. Therefore, a major limitation to the study of congressional special election contests was the infrequency of their occurrence.

Although more congressional special elections would result in more data, and possibly more robust results, the fact that half of all congressional special elections were precipitated by a member’s death or their involvement in scandalous behavior (see Table 4.2 in Chapter 4) should temper our enthusiasm for the future occurrence of congressional special elections.

While temporal constraints limited the time span of the analysis, and the infrequency of congressional special elections spurs questions concerning the reliability of the results obtained in this analysis, the study of congressional special elections presented other problems as well.

Applying the candidate-constituency model to the study of open seat and congressional special elections required controlling for the population of the district where the election occurred. Political scientists routinely resort to the census to obtain district demographic information. However, information obtained from the decennial census may be outdated.
Article 1, § 2 of the United States Constitution mandates a census be conducted for the purposes of representation, “within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct.”

Although figures from a census conducted in 1990 may still be applicable to a congressional district in 1992 or even 1994, the demographics of the district may have changed by 1996 or 1998. Researchers controlling for district demographics by applying the 1990 census figures to congressional races that occurred later in the decade would not capture any subsequent shift in district demographics. Even though the use of census data is the convention in political science, the census is fraught with inaccuracy.

The other problems encountered during the analysis of congressional special elections related to the unavailability of the data required for further investigation. For instance, congressional special election exit poll data would give researchers a better picture of the type of voters who turnout for these infrequent, low information, congressional special elections that occur throughout the year. Exit poll data would also provide an explanation for the electoral outcome, further corroborating or condemning the conventional wisdom that congressional special election outcomes are the result of referenda effects directed against the incumbent president or particular policies.

Since congressional special elections are rarely studied by scholars, and seldom covered by journalists (unless the race is “newsworthy” or interesting, which probably

---

3 U.S. Constitution, art. 1, sec. 2.
makes the contest an outlier), exit polls would provide pertinent district relevant data to researchers trying to link a causal chain and explain an electoral outcome.

Lastly, the research presented in this project was hampered by the fact that the real competition for the congressional seat could have occurred during the primaries. Primary campaigns force candidates to expend resources, defend positions, define their opposition, and stake out more extreme positions to placate the base of the party. In essence, winning a primary may be disadvantageous if the candidate is too poor, or their views too extreme, to contend in the general election.

This research recognized the importance of primary campaigns; however, the different methods states and parties use to select candidates and unavailability of district relevant data made the systematic study of primary contests nearly impossible.

5.5.1 Summary of Research Problems

To summarize, the research presented in this work was plagued by four main problems:

1) Temporal constraints since campaign spending needed to be controlled for.

2) The occurrence of relatively few congressional special elections (96 cases) compared to open seat elections (473 cases).

3) Data inaccuracies related to reliance on the decennial census.

4) The absence of the exit poll data specifically, and the district relevant data more generally, required to:

   a) Study primary campaigns systematically.
b) Assess differences in turnout between open seat and congressional special elections.

c) Reject or fail to reject the conventional wisdom regarding open seat and congressional special election outcomes as the result of referenda effects directed toward the incumbent president or particular policies.

d) Firmly establish causality and explain electoral outcomes.

5.6 Overcoming These Problems

Unfortunately, little can be done to overcome the first two problems that plagued this analysis. Locating campaign spending records before the enactment of the FECA is difficult, and only the passage of time will permit more congressional special elections to be analyzed. However, other research techniques, or people uniquely positioned in the campaign consulting field may be able to address the other data problems presented above.

While demographic figures in the decennial census may quickly become outdated due to population shifts from election to election, many of the census figures reported in sources such as The Almanac of American Politics concern the voting-age population (VAP). Political scientists, pollsters, and consultants are much more concerned with information on the registered or likely voters in a district due to their propensity to turnout on election-day.

Scholars may be able to obtain more recent demographic information on registered voters in a state or district by contacting the election officials in that state or constituency. Contacting the relevant officials would provide more accurate information
and allow researchers to control for the demographics of those most likely to affect the outcome of the congressional race being investigated.

Interviewing state election officials, party officials, and candidates may also provide scholars with insight into congressional special election primary campaigns. Since district relevant congressional special election data is extremely sparse, and largely nonexistent for congressional special election primary campaigns, interviews may uncover why a state or party chose a particular method of candidate selection, or what issues dominated the congressional special election primary campaign?

Interviews may expose that the date of the congressional special election was selected with an eye toward increasing turnout, or that unforeseen weather affected turnout. If congressional special elections generally, and congressional special election primaries specifically, go largely unnoticed and unreported by the mainstream media, interviews may be the only avenue to understanding the dynamics of the contest.

Since exit poll data is the best way to obtain district relevant data on turnout, the issues affecting the campaign and the votes of constituents, and to establish causality, congressional special elections research would also be greatly improved through the cooperation of campaign consultants.

However, the proprietary nature of exit poll data makes it hard to obtain. This project made repeated efforts to reach out to the Republican and Democratic Party in hopes of obtaining prior exit poll data, however, these efforts were met with resistance. Hence, journalistic sources were begrudgingly employed in the qualitative analysis to obtain district relevant campaign and election data when necessary.
Lastly, despite that congressional special election outcomes may be seen as bellwethers for the following presidential election, a better model needs to be constructed to account for the high degree of correlation that plagued the present analysis.

Furthermore, researchers must remember the winner of the presidency is officially determined by the Electoral College, not the popular vote. While many models have been designed to predict the popular vote in a presidential election quite accurately, future research could focus on designing models that predict the Electoral College vote in presidential elections.4

Despite the innumerable obstacles encountered throughout this research, the findings presented in this work have important implications for prospective congressional candidates, the political parties that support them, and governance and democracy more generally. These implications are discussed below, beginning with the implications from the open seat analysis.

5.7 Implications of Open Seat Findings

Chapter 3 discovered that national conditions exerted a small direct affect on open seat electoral outcomes. National conditions played a much larger indirect role in open seat elections by affecting the calculus of “strategic” politicians, helping to structure the field of competition, and affecting the actions of campaign contributors.

However, the implications of Jacobson and Kernell’s “strategic politician” theory extend beyond electoral outcomes alone. The actions of strategic candidates fighting for

---

4 For a good overview of predictive models see Randall J. Jones Jr., Who Will Be In the White House: Predicting Presidential Elections (New York: Longman, 2002).
elected office have elevated the importance of the political parties and affected the political process in the aggregate. These linkages are laid out below.

According to Aldrich, American political parties have undergone three distinct phases. Initially organized as a means to solve the social choice problem relating to the size and scope of the federal government (known as the “great principle”), during the Jacksonian era, parties became the driving force behind mass social mobilization.

In short, from about 1830 to about 1950, parties were transformed into umbrella organizations employed to aggregate various interests and mobilize collective support for those interests within the electorate.

Since the 1960’s, with technological improvements enabling candidates to easily provide the electorate with the informational goods parties use to supply, American political campaigns have become increasingly candidate-centered affairs. Today, political parties have transformed into “parties-in-service” to candidates.5

So if qualified candidates run “strategically”, when national conditions are favorable, and their probability of reelection higher; and parties provide “services” to potential office seekers, the onus falls on the political parties (particularly the minority party) to recruit, and provide resources to, qualified opposition candidates.

For instance, if we assume candidates run “strategically”, based on national conditions and the candidate’s probability of victory given those conditions, this rational behavior leads to an electoral imbalance.

---

The party seen as responsible for good national conditions (or not held responsible for worsening national conditions) will have a relatively deep pool of highly qualified candidates with large war chests eager to run in the open seat election at its disposal. Conversely, the disadvantaged party’s candidate pool will be relatively shallow, and donors will be less willing to support the sacrificial lambs called upon to carry the party banner into the electoral arena.

However, what is good for the goose is not good for the gander. Strategic behavior on the individual level (whether to enter the race or opt to wait for more favorable conditions) decreases the ability of the party disadvantaged by national conditions to compete in the open seat election, ultimately depriving the electorate of a real choice on election-day, and paving an easier electoral path for their opponent vying for the open seat. Insulated by incumbency in future elections, electoral competition for this seat will decrease exponentially over time until it is vacated yet again.

This individually rational behavior in turn, inflicts long term collective consequences on the political parties, and by extension, the political process; since winning or losing congressional elections either expands or threatens the power of the majority party in the House of Representatives.

Given that the majority party has greater control over the congressional agenda (through the power to determine what bills are considered under what procedures as well as the ability to prevent unwanted legislation from coming to a vote), individual
elections ultimately affect the legislative output of Congress and the collective reputation of the political parties.\(^6\)

With policy outputs more reflective of the majority party within Congress (although not necessarily the majority of the electorate), the minority party is reduced to relying on divided government to alter the final legislation, or simply being obstructionist under unified government. However, with few accomplishments to boast about, obstructionism may lead to an even smaller congressional minority and even greater power for the majority party (especially under unified government).

Nonetheless, all hope is not lost. The minority party can rail against congressional policy outputs as ineffective and in need of change. However, if the political parties cannot recruit experienced, well-qualified candidates, and provide them with the electoral resources to run a serious campaign, poor electoral performances will only perpetuate the frustrations of the minority party in Congress until the collective brand name of the party is ruined and possibly supplanted by another movement.

If this “domino theory” initiated by “strategic” behavior is hard to imagine look at the current state of the Republican Party. The presidency of George W. Bush was dominated by a protracted, increasingly unpopular war in the Middle East, congressional scandal, and a worsening economy. Such toxic national conditions led to the Democratic Party capturing Congress, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, and the desire for change.

Reduced to the minority party in government, and void of tangible accomplishments, the Republican Party has become increasingly obstructionist in Congress, and its brand name tarnished.

Disillusioned and distraught, many conservatives in the electorate have cast aside Republican Party candidates in the 2010 primary season in favor of candidates from the more conservative Tea Party; a fringe movement advocating a return to small government and the principles of the founding fathers. The Republican Party has seemingly lost its way. Seen as ineffective, and void of ideas and solutions, the Republican Party has been supplanted by a fringe alternative.

If the Republican Party could have found and funded viable candidates to contest the current Democratic control of the political process, the dominos may have stopped falling and the electoral odds of the Republican Party may have improved. However, the strength of the Tea Party (and the weakness of its candidates) undermines the power of the Republican Party, and may actually present their Democratic opponents with an easier electoral path in November 2010.

In sum, as current conditions illustrate, “strategic” behavior, though rational on the individual level, may be irrational when considering the collective goals of political parties. Though the party disadvantaged by national conditions may run sacrificial lambs as candidates, the decision to offer them upon the electoral altar creates an easier electoral path for the opposition, and in turn, affects congressional margins and policy outputs.
To forestall this tailspin, the political party disadvantaged by national conditions must fulfill its role as service provider and find and fund qualified candidates able to complete in the electoral environment. Shirking this responsibility may lead the majority party to lose control of Congress, or condemn the minority party to damnation.

5.8 Implications of Special Election Findings

Chapter 4 uncovered that congressional special elections were distinctly local affairs dominated by the characteristics of the candidates and the constituency. As previously explained, the fact that national conditions had no perceptible affect on congressional special election outcomes may relate to the absence of publicity regarding these isolated races (and therefore, the media’s inability to prime national considerations among the electorate in these contests), or differences within the open seat and congressional special election electorates themselves.

Nonetheless, the findings presented in Chapter 4 have interesting implications for future congressional candidates, policy outputs, and the nature of American democracy. These implications are outlined below.

Although the individual characteristics of a congressional race are always heavily important in congressional elections, the unique context of congressional special elections presents prospective candidates with a different set of challenges they must overcome to be successful.

Most importantly, if congressional special elections are typically sporadic, low information affairs that occur outside of the media spotlight, voter awareness and subsequently, voter turnout, may be remarkably low in congressional special elections.
Hence, campaign organization, and get out the vote efforts should be the paramount concern of successful congressional special election candidates.

For instance, in the race to replace Stewart McKinney (R-CT) in the summer of 1987, Republican hopefuls Christopher Shays and John Becker resorted to campaigning outside local supermarkets, only to find out the patrons were unaware of the impending congressional special election. The state vice chairman of the Republican Party, Betsee Osborne, even joked, “the only job I wanted was to ride the Nantucket ferry and hand out absentee ballots, that’s the place to be.”

Given that congressional special election campaigns are condensed, and may be conducted during times when people are not thinking about politics (like Thanksgiving, Christmas, or summer vacation season) increasing voter awareness is key, even if it means relying on door-to-door style campaigning.

Relating the results discovered in Chapter 4 to democratic theory, the local nature of congressional special election contests would provide the founding fathers with a degree of comfort. However, the importance of campaign spending in these contests, and the Supreme Court’s recent ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, allowing for limitless corporate funding of independent political broacasts, and its implications for policy outputs and the representativeness of American democracy would concern the founders greatly.

---

The founding fathers initially envisioned the House of Representatives as the legislative chamber most closely in tune with the passions of the people. In *Federalist* No. 52 Madison argued,

“*First.* As it is essential to liberty that the government in general should have a common interest with the people, so it is particularly essential that the branch of it under consideration should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured.”

In essence, frequent elections ensure members of the House of Representatives remain in touch with the concerns of the constituency. Whether Representatives currently act as delegates, as a voice for their constituency, or as trustees, ‘entrusted’ by the electorate to act on their behalf entitled to a degree of deliberative autonomy, is hard to debate. Representatives were intended to, and have continued to, act as trustees.

Burke summed up his position in the delegate/trustee debate saying,

“his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living...Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his

---

judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

In Burke’s opinion, representatives should rely on their own experience and enlightened judgment when making decisions and not be slaves to their constituents. The founders adopted this perspective as well. However, if campaign spending is an integral aspect of congressional special elections, the idea that the influence of campaign contributors may supplant the representative’s own judgment would strike fear in the heart of the framers.

According to Arnold, members of Congress must pay close attention to the “attentive public” when making decisions, due to their interest in politics and potential for action at the ballot box. However, if campaign spending is important in congressional special elections, and corporations are not limited in their funding of independent political broadcasts, the question becomes, who constitutes the “attentive public” members of Congress respond to?

Since corporate backing could go a long way in aiding a member of Congress’ bid for reelection, would corporate interests drowned out the desires of the member’s constituency? Rep. Joe Barton’s (R-TX) recent apology to Tony Hayward, the CEO of British Petroleum, in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill that devastated the Gulf of Mexico and the American industries that survive from its bounty,

---

suggests corporate interest may take precedence over constituency concerns. The founding fathers would find this detestable.

While corporate interests have always been a part of American politics though the work of political action committees and issue advocacy groups, the Supreme Court’s recent ruling has the potential to drastically increase corporate influence in American politics.

Members of Congress may cease to represent states or districts, but corporate interests. Like American sporting venues such as the Verizon Center in Washington D.C., or Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, members of Congress may simply be known as the representative of “Big Oil” from Texas, or the voice of “Wall Street” from New York.
## APPENDIX

### Table 3.8b Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Open Seat Elections

**Using Gaddie's Spending Measure, 1978-2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Exp</td>
<td>7.271***</td>
<td>3.777***</td>
<td>4.012***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.963)</td>
<td>(0.830)</td>
<td>(0.752)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Exp</td>
<td>-5.179***</td>
<td>-3.114***</td>
<td>-2.892***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.995)</td>
<td>(0.833)</td>
<td>(0.753)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Spending</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Spending</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
<td>-0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-1.020***</td>
<td>-0.145***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-1.121***</td>
<td>-1.124***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.041)</td>
<td>(0.038)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-0.379***</td>
<td>0.529***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>(0.039)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.114***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Oct.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.709***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Loss</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.614***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.651)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>-0.064</td>
<td>0.094*</td>
<td>0.300***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>(0.053)</td>
<td>(0.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>47.536***</td>
<td>30.307***</td>
<td>60.552***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.447)</td>
<td>(2.630)</td>
<td>(7.571)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Observations | 471 | 471 | 471 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.336 | 0.549 | 0.632 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the Republican share of the two-party vote in the open seat election; campaign spending is not logged.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party is Incumbent</td>
<td>15.627***</td>
<td>11.657***</td>
<td>9.945***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.789)</td>
<td>(2.946)</td>
<td>(2.862)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican President</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.057</td>
<td>4.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.536)</td>
<td>(3.828)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party % Last Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.190)</td>
<td>(0.193)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s Party Exp</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.253*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4.352)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out Party’s Experience</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-3.732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.476)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval (Oct.)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>36.662***</td>
<td>20.279***</td>
<td>21.430***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.091)</td>
<td>(7.250)</td>
<td>(7.496)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.314</td>
<td>0.364</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the president's party's share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election.
### Table 4.9b Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections Using Gaddie’s Spending Measure, 1977-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Exp</td>
<td>10.133***</td>
<td>5.583**</td>
<td>4.835*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.602)</td>
<td>(2.614)</td>
<td>(2.679)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.327)</td>
<td>(2.565)</td>
<td>(2.466)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Spending</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Spending</td>
<td>-0.000**</td>
<td>-0.000**</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>-0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.356**</td>
<td>0.422**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.173)</td>
<td>(0.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.512***</td>
<td>0.599***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.140)</td>
<td>(0.165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval (Oct.)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.386)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>0.174</td>
<td>0.305**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.177)</td>
<td>(0.135)</td>
<td>(0.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>45.345***</td>
<td>22.525**</td>
<td>47.931**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.511)</td>
<td>(8.581)</td>
<td>(20.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.332</td>
<td>0.536</td>
<td>0.544</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the Republican share of the two-party vote in the congressional election; campaign spending is not logged
### Table 4.9c Regression Estimates of Republican Vote Share in Special Elections, 1977-2008 Using Actual Presidential Approval and Interaction Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Exp</td>
<td>4.589</td>
<td>3.855</td>
<td>4.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.879)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Exp</td>
<td>-2.754</td>
<td>-4.039</td>
<td>-4.028*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.964)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican’s Spending (ln$)</td>
<td>5.332***</td>
<td>3.637**</td>
<td>2.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.189)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat’s Spending (ln$)</td>
<td>-5.139***</td>
<td>-4.428***</td>
<td>-3.464**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.411)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic in District</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.290*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.132)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Normal Vote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.249</td>
<td>0.493**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.199)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Presidential Approval (Actual Oct. Approval)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood at Time of Election</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.857)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Pres. Party ID</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>64.328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(63.300)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval*Repub. Pres.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.293)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Mood*Repub. Pres.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-1.152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.038)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Counter</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.219*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>43.539***</td>
<td>43.829**</td>
<td>-23.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14.747)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.495</td>
<td>0.542</td>
<td>0.592</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: Dependent variable is the Republican share of the two-party vote in the congressional special election
BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS AND ARTICLES


**Journalistic Sources**


*USA Today*, 30 August 1989.