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INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE

Incumbency advantage refers to the supposed electoral advantage that current officeholders have when running for reelection.

Scholars have identified several ways that candidates get an electoral boost by virtue of already holding office. While these studies have focused overwhelmingly on Congress, especially the House, scholars have found that statewide legislative and executive officers also benefit from an incumbency advantage. Not surprisingly, most of these advantages are related to money, whether directly or indirectly. However, while these advantages are considerable, they can be overcome if the conditions are right.

The notion of an incumbency advantage first attracted attention when scholars observed that congressional incumbents get reelected at unusually high rates. During the last 70 years, the number of incumbents seeking reelection to the House of Representatives has typically been above 90 percent, and more than 90 percent of these have won reelection. Furthermore, very few of these were close races—on average, more than 70 percent of House incumbents per electoral cycle since 1960 have won their elections with 60 percent of the vote or more. While Senate incumbents have faced more uncertainty in their reelection campaigns over time, they still have won more than 80 percent of the time and about 50 percent have won with more than 60 percent of the vote (OpenSecrets.org 2016; Jacobson and Carson 2016, 36; Stanley and Niemi 2015, Table 1-19).

Holding office confers benefits that stem from certain institutional characteristics of Congress. Most directly, members of Congress have an impressive array of material resources at their disposal: a salary; large personal staffs (typically 16–18 staff members per representative and closer to 40 for senators); and travel, office, and communications expense allowances totaling around \$1.5 million a year for representatives and several times that for senators (Mann and Ornstein 2016). Members can also take advantage of the "franking privilege," which allows them to send mail to constituents free of charge. By using these resources, members can build relationships and goodwill with their constituencies by cultivating name recognition, claiming credit for legislative accomplishments, and providing service to constituents. Indeed, as the size and complexity of the federal bureaucracy has grown over time, members have placed an increasing emphasis on helping constituents navigate a confusing maze of federal programs to access needed federal benefits. Since the 1970s, the percentage of House staff working in district offices has more than doubled to about 50 percent. As this service is usually gratefully received and entirely nonpartisan, it allows members to generate support throughout their districts.

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Another institutional benefit of office is Congress's committee structure, which allows members to carve out areas of legislative expertise and control that are relevant to key economic interests of their local districts, such as agriculture or technology. And as seniority contributes to committee influence, this benefit is one that grows with an incumbent's tenure in office. Another advantage of office is the ability to add earmarks to legislation that direct government spending to specific projects or companies that promote business growth, new jobs, or other visible economic benefits in the legislative district. While earmarks have been officially banned in Congress in recent years, the practice almost certainly persists in some form, as Congress now consolidates most of its appropriations bills into complex, 2,000-page omnibus budget bills that defy close scrutiny. And in any case, the associated practice of claiming credit for steering federal dollars to local districts continues. This highlights another institutional factor that may contribute to a legislative incumbency advantage: as a body of 535 members, Congress creates a situation of collective, rather than individual, responsibility. This allows members to claim credit for having a hand in popular accomplishments, while blame for failures is spread across the institution as a whole, making it unclear who to hold to account. This is why approval ratings of individual members can be quite high at the same time that approval of Congress remains abysmally low.

Incumbency can also contribute to major advantages in fundraising. For starters, by virtue of winning public office, incumbents have already-established relationships with a network of key political constituencies (party elites, activists, interest groups, etc.) that they can draw on for financial, organizational, and logistical support for future campaigns. They also have the ability to cultivate new supporters by building a track record of bringing benefits to the district or to key supporters.

Incumbents also have a clear advantage in raising money from various interest groups through their political action committees (PACs). PACs are primarily concerned with getting access to members who sit on key committees and can introduce and pass legislation that advances a group's interests. Thus, PACs are motivated to give to candidates with a proven track record of winning and governing, so they favor giving to incumbents, often of both parties. Most PACs give overwhelmingly to incumbents, typically 80 percent or more, which is a substantial financial advantage considering the nearly half a billion dollars they gave to candidates in 2014 (OpenSecrets.org 2016). Incumbents can also raise money through PACs that can be used to help fund copartisans in other races up and down the ticket, increasing incumbents' value to their party and solidifying their organizational support network.

One key mechanism driving the incumbency advantage is that incumbents use these considerable financial and other resources to influence the strategic calculations of potential challengers and those who control key campaign resources that might aid them. By continuously raising money and amassing large campaign chests, incumbents can create an aura of invulnerability, leading high-quality challengers and their potential backers to bide their time on making a bid for a seat. Indeed, over the last 40 years, only about 15 percent of House challengers have been able to raise the estimated \$700,000 *minimum* amount required for a competitive race, while high-quality challengers (defined as those having held some kind

of elective office) constitute only 20 percent of the candidates facing incumbents, compared to 50 percent in open seat races (Jacobson and Carson 2016, 50–63).

Redistricting is another factor that may contribute to the incumbency advantage. While not directly related to money, it can have financial implications. Through redistricting, parties can shape the legislative boundaries of districts such that their chances of losing are sharply diminished. Individual legislators have an incentive to push for inclusion of as many copartisans as possible to avoid any margin for error in their reelection campaigns. Heavily gerrymandered district boundaries thus mean that incumbents will need to spend less to stave off general election challengers. Energy can instead be focused on deterring primary challengers. But as primaries tend to be of a lower profile and have lower turnout, less money will be needed than in a typical competitive general election race. Furthermore, the party will have to spend less to defend incumbents in these districts, freeing up money to be directed to other races.

The advantages of incumbency are considerable, but they are no guarantee of reelection. While incumbents get reelected at very high rates, this has fluctuated over time. Scholars documented a sharp increase in the incumbency advantage that lasted from the 1950s into the 1990s. Most scholars believe this was related to a decline in party loyalty and the consequent rise of a more candidate-centered politics during the period. Since then, this extra incumbency advantage has declined, as partisan polarization and party loyalty have strengthened and politics have become increasingly oriented to national concerns. Furthermore, national tides periodically occur that can lead to big turnovers, such as the Republican “Contract with America” and Tea Party waves in 1994 and 2010 or the Democrats’ sweeping gains in 2006 capitalizing on dissatisfaction with Bush and the Iraq War. The incumbency advantage is also conditional on the quality and resources of challengers. Though not frequently, well-funded and high-quality candidates do sometimes challenge incumbents, and they sometimes win—especially when the partisan makeup of a district does not strongly favor the incumbent. Finally, career considerations lead incumbents to strike a balance between focus on their district and focus on national policymaking and reputation. As a result, incumbents who think they are invulnerable are sometimes surprised to discover—too late—that their constituents think they are out of touch, as seems to have occurred with the primary defeats of Richard Lugar (at the time the most senior Republican in the Senate) in 2012 and majority leader Eric Cantor in 2014.

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Further Reading

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