Uncontested Seats and Electoral Competition for the U.S. House of Representatives Over Time

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We examine how changes in the incidence of uncontested seats for the U.S. House of Representatives over time reflect responses to partisan change, changes in electoral rules, and long-term secular changes in the American political system. We use a multiple interrupted times series model to test the relationship between the number of uncontested House seats from 1912 to 1994 and the 1932 realignment, midterm elections, the rise of the Republican South, redistricting, the abolition of cross-filing laws in California, and the pronounced rise of the incumbency advantage since 1966. We test models explaining the number of uncontested House seats occupied by each party and the difference between the parties in the number of those seats. We find that the rise of the Republican South started in 1964 and the incidence of midterm elections contributed strongly to changes in the overall rate of uncontested House races.

The incidence of uncontested seats is one indicator of the competitiveness of an electoral system. The goal of our study is to explain the level of competition for the U.S. House of Representatives over the 42 general elections from 1912 to 1994 by looking at the number of uncontested seats. The over-time variance in systemic levels of competition in congressional elections is a relatively unstudied area in American politics. Using the number of uncontested seats, we examine the overall competition over this 82-year period, the level of competition experienced by each major party, and the difference in the level of competition between the parties. Our findings show that competition for the House, as measured by the number of uncontested seats, has increased over the years. This suggests that at this very basic level of competition, American democracy is healthier than at any other time this century.

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Notable exceptions to this are Alford and Brady (1993); Garand and Gross (1984), and Garand, Wink and Vincent (1993). Squire (1989) details a number of district-level and candidate-specific characteristics that contribute to increasing or decreasing the probability of uncontested races. See also Jacobson (1990, 46–9).

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COMPETITION OVER TIME IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

A number of different operationalizations of the concept of “competition” exist in the congressional elections literature. Some authors employ a distinction between “marginal” and “nonmarginal” incumbents. Others use a continuous measure of two-party vote (or some variant of it). Still others use a difference score to measure the margin by which congressional candidates are victorious.

Our study takes a different path in defining competition. We measure the level of competition in any given House election year by the number of uncontested seats, defined as those races in which there is only one major-party candidate. While it may be true that not all candidates are able to run competitive races or have bright prospects for winning, having a competitor on the ballot is a basic component of democracy. Thus, while “you can’t beat somebody with nobody” is a popular political axiom, it is not trivial to note that you can’t beat anybody with nothing. Consequently, parties have worked hard over the years to fill their slots on the ballot (e.g., Herrnson 1988, 48–56; Key 1964, 446–7), and long-shot candidates make rational calculations to run despite the odds (Banks and Kiewiet 1989). With “competition” so defined, an assessment of the level of competition in any given election quickly follows: a small number of uncontested seats indicates a relatively competitive year in House elections, while more uncontested House seats indicate a less competitive year.

Using this measure of competition, how competitive have House elections been over time? Figure 1 displays the pattern of the incidence of uncontested seats over the period 1912 to 1994. (We chose 1912 as our starting point because that was the first election where the number of seats in the House was fixed at 435.) A glance at Figure 1 shows two interesting patterns. First, a saw-tooth pattern appears with some regularity over the 42 elections, showing alternating peaks (less competition) and valleys (more competition). Second, in recent decades competition has increased. Starting in the 1950s, the number of uncontested House seats decreases, with the notable exception of an increase in the 1980s. With the longer time perspective given in Figure 1, however, it appears that the lack of competition in the late 1980s may be an aberration. Indeed, in the two most recent House elections, the level of competition has soared relative to that of the entire period. The number of uncontested seats in 1990 was 80; in 1992 30 seats were uncontested, the lowest

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2 This demarcation is somewhat arbitrary. The “usual” standard is that obtaining 56% or less of the vote in the previous election denotes a “marginal” representative. Jacobson (1987) makes a strong case against this “standard” by asserting that even though most incumbents now win with higher vote shares, they may still consider themselves “marginal.”

3 It also is the case that very few races since 1910 involve serious third-party candidates in the place of one of the two major parties. Elections before 1912 had a greater incidence of such situations.
level during the time period under study.\footnote{That 1992 had the fewest uncontested House seats in the entire series should not be a surprise. Taken together, Jacobson and Dimock (1994) and Groseclose and Krehbiel (1994) attribute the increased competition and resulting membership turnover to three phenomena: the House bank scandal, the "golden parachute" incentive for retirement, and redistricting.} There was a slight rebound to 46 uncontested House seats in 1994, a figure still well below the average over this time period.

Defining competition in the House in terms of the number of uncontested seats also allows us to assess competition between the parties over time. Figures 2 and 3 present the number of uncontested House seats from 1912 to 1994 for each of the two major political parties and their regional wings. The conclusions one draws about interparty competition are similar to those about the total number of uncontested House seats. First, the two-election cycle appears to hold for both Democrats and Republicans; in one election competition is up, and in the next it is down. Second, the parties diverge in the level of competition in recent elections. From the mid-1960s through the 1980s, the number of uncontested seats enjoyed by the Democrats was roughly constant. Since 1990, however, the Democrats have experienced a dramatic drop in the number of "free rides" they have received. In contrast, over that same time period, the number of uncontested seats held by the Republicans has generally increased. In 1994, Republicans had
more uncontested seats than did the Democrats, the only such occasion in the 42 elections studied here.

Because it is so different from that of the Democrats, a few comments about the Republican series are in order. Most notable is the steep decline in the number of uncontested Republican House seats beginning in 1932 and the low numbers of such seats in the next 22 elections; after 1932, the graph reaches the level of 10 uncontested seats in only three elections. One might attribute this to the realignment of 1932; apparently, Republicans got fewer free rides as the result of losing the partisan base they had possessed for almost 80 years. A second observation about Republican seats is the recent (and dramatic) increase in the numbers of uncontested Republican House seats in the South. This increase begins to appear in the mid-1960s, possibly in conjunction with the Goldwater run for the presidency (Black and Black 1987; Canon 1992; Converse, Clausen, and Miller 1965). In 1994 there were 20 of these seats with nine in Florida alone.

The three elections where Republican uncontested House seats numbered more than ten were 1942 (13), 1948 (13), and 1952 (12). Both 1942 and 1952 were strong Republican years: in 1942 the GOP picked up 55 seats in the House, while in 1952 they gained 22 seats. In 1948 Truman unexpectedly defeated GOP candidate Dewey, carrying 75 Democrats in on his coattails.

The South is defined here as the states of the Confederacy: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.
Although "eyeballing" a time series can suggest some possible relationships, more rigorous and systematic analysis is, of course, required. We employ a multiple interrupted time-series analysis to assess the impact of certain variables on the level of competition in U.S. House elections. Before doing so, however, we must fully identify potential explanations for changes in the time-series data. Examination of the time series presented here has suggested some possible explanations; but other, less obvious explanations can be offered as well.

**Variables Affecting Competition in House Elections Over Time**

We start from a well-grounded assumption that candidates for office do not make the decision to run for office lightly or randomly. We think potential candidates make rational calculations about whether to run or not, assessing in simple terms whether or not running for office and holding office is worth the effort and other things they might have to forgo. A number of studies have revealed the calculated behavior of possible candidates, although they often show that different candidates place different weights on the variables they use in making their decisions (e.g., Canon 1993; Fowler and McClure 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Kazee 1994). In general, candidates are more likely to run as they

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7See also the discussion of candidate decision making in Fowler (1993) and Squire (1995, 898–9).
see their chances to win increase. Similarly, where chances for victory are dim, the prospects for uncontested races increase (Squire 1989). Thus, we should expect that the number of uncontested seats will fluctuate with the competitiveness of the electoral environment.

We classify the variables that might affect electoral competition for the U.S. House of Representatives in three general categories. The first is partisan change. In this category, we include such phenomena as the partisan shift in the previous election's vote; the realignment of 1932, the rise of the Republican South, and midterm elections. The second set of potential explanations is change in electoral rules. The redistricting of seats within states and the end of the practice of cross-filing in California primaries are two changes that we think might influence competition for the House over time. The final category is secular change in the electoral system. For example, the increase in the incumbency advantage starting in the mid-1960s is likely to have affected competition. Each of these sets of changes, along with other, party-specific variables, may also affect the level of competition experienced by the two major parties. (The measurement and coding of the independent variables are discussed in the appendix.)

**Partisan Change**

We might expect that one guide potential challengers use in making their decision whether to run or not is what happened in the previous election. Overall, when a substantial shift in the vote takes place—measured as the absolute change in vote percentage between the two parties in the past two elections—we anticipate that the unsettled political atmosphere encourages more challengers. In contrast, a more placid outcome may stifle competition. At the party level, strong shifts towards one party should hearten that party's possible candidates and discourage the other party's hopefuls. In a sense, these variables may offer the most straightforward tests of the strategic candidate hypothesis (Jacobson and Kernell 1981).

Most political scholars view periods of realignment in American politics as tumultuous times when the political system is in a state of flux. Realignment may change the patterns of overall competition as well as those of interparty competition. We would expect the turbulent effects of a realigning period to have the immediate effect of increasing competition, because the unsettled nature of electoral politics gives potential candidates from both parties reasons to run. Once electoral politics settles, however, the number of uncontested seats should increase. Because the 1932 realigning election was clearly detrimental to Republican electoral fortunes, we might expect it to have reduced Republican free rides in the House races over a long term as Democrats saw improved electoral prospects. We might also expect a concurrent increase in the number of uncontested Democratic House seats, although such an increase does not necessarily follow from a drop in GOP uncontested seats.
As noted in the discussion about the Republican series and shown by Figure 3, 1964 marks the rise of the Republican South. Among others, Canon (1992) and Converse, Clausen, and Miller (1965) stress the importance of the South to Goldwater’s presidential bid in 1964. Black and Black (1987) also emphasize the rise of competitive Republicans on all levels at this same time. As the GOP becomes a more active force in Southern elections, the number of Democrats getting free rides should decrease, and, overall, competition for the House should be enhanced.

In examining the time series in Figures 1, 2, and 3, we note the possibility of a repetitive two-election cycle of competition. The effects that midterm elections have on congressional elections are widely studied if not widely agreed upon (Campbell 1993; Marra and Ostrom 1989; Tufte 1975). In terms of competition, we expect midterm elections to be less competitive than their presidential-year counterparts for at least two reasons. First, the level of political interest in midterm years is usually mild at best. Lower voter turnout levels in these “off-year” elections are indicative of the lower interest (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 178–9). In contrast, a presidential race at the top of the ticket is likely to draw more interest from both voters and prospective congressional candidates. Second, the prospect of using a strong presidential candidate to “ride coattails” into office may entice prospective candidates to make races they might otherwise avoid. Midterm elections, then, should be associated with a decrease in competition, meaning that the total number of uncontested House seats should increase.

Changes in Electoral Rules

Like periods of realignment, redistricting can have the effect of increasing uncertainty in the political process (Gelman and King 1994). Incumbents are not sure how well they will do in newly drawn congressional districts. More important, potential challengers may see new possibilities for success in redrawn districts, increasing competition in the aggregate. Thus redistricting should be associated with increases in competition; concomitantly, the total number of uncontested House seats should decrease in the first election and then begin increasing for the rest of the decade. The partisan consequences of redistricting are less clear. Certainly, Republicans have contended that Democrats, who more often than not have controlled the redistricting process, have redrawn the lines to their advantage. This might manifest itself by increasing the number of uncontested Democratic seats, decreasing the number of uncontested GOP seats, or both.

Article I, Section 4 of the United States Constitution leaves the manner by which House members are elected to the individual states. Over time, the states have made adjustments to the rules by which members of the House are elected. One such change took place in 1953 when California greatly impeded the practice
of cross-filing in primary elections. From 1913 to 1953 candidates in California could easily file in both parties’ primaries. Thus, one candidate could win both primaries by simply cross-filing; when the general election was held, there would be no major-party opposition. Indeed, because of the cross-filing system, many of California’s House elections before 1954 meet our definition of “uncontested.”

Given that California is a state that has had a large delegation for many decades, the end of cross-filing should be associated with a decrease in the total number of uncontested House seats. In addition, because GOP candidates tended to benefit from the cross-filing system (Bell and Price 1980, 162–3), the change in the law should be associated with a decline in the number of Republican uncontested seats.

**Secular Change**

Many scholars argue that incumbents began winning reelection at a higher rate and by a larger share of the vote starting in the mid-1960s. There is some consensus that the 1966 election is the demarcation point for the rise of the power of incumbency (Alford and Brady 1993; Alford and Hibbing 1981; Garand and Gross 1984; Mayhew 1974). The increasing incumbency advantage should discourage potential challengers and increase the number of uncontested seats for both parties.

**Independent Variables with Party-Specific Effects**

There is, of course, no necessary connection between the number of uncontested seats each party enjoys. The number of uncontested seats can increase or decrease for both parties in a particular year; there is no reason why an increase in the number of uncontested Democratic seats has to lead to a decrease in the number of uncontested Republican seats. But there are variables that might affect the level of competition experienced by each major party.

Each party enters an election holding a particular number of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The aggregate outcomes of elections are partially functions of the number of seats exposed: the more seats a party holds, the more

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8 A 1952 referendum to place a candidate’s party identification on the ballot greatly discouraged but did not prevent cross-filing in California primaries. A 1959 law formally prohibited the practice. An examination of the time series of uncontested House seats in California revealed a sharp drop from the 1952 election to the 1954 election, thus we use 1954 as the interruption.

9 Other states have had different election rules that might be associated with the incidence of uncontested seats. Since 1974, for example, Louisiana has used a blanket or unitary primary, which allows a candidate to win a seat by getting a majority of the vote against all other candidates. Thus we count contested primaries in Louisiana (that is, primaries with at least one candidate from each major party) as contested general election races. Other states with different sorts of blanket primaries, Washington state and until 1992, Alaska, have had too few districts to warrant separate examination.

10 Because we include a dummy variable for the rise of the GOP in the South in 1964, and a counter variable for the rise in incumbency advantage starting in 1966, it may be that the 1966 counter picks up some of the ongoing effects of the dramatic change in the South.
likely it is to lose some (Marra and Ostrom 1989; Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986). In any given election year, however, not all of a party’s seats will be contested; some of a party’s incumbents will get a free ride while others will face major-party opposition. Because the vast majority of uncontested elections involve incumbents and not open seats (Squire 1989, 284–5), the number of uncontested seats a party has in any election year is likely to be a function of the number of seats it has exposed.11

The arguments made about the incidence of a midterm election might also hold for the individual parties, yet in a slightly different manner. Voters may “punish” the president’s party in midterm elections (Tufte 1975). From 1912 to 1994, the president’s party lost seats in every midterm election except 1934. An increase in the number of a party’s uncontested House seats may reflect the electorate’s dissatisfaction with the president’s party at the midterm. It may also reflect the conscious decisions of elites in the president’s party to avoid a defeat in a “year of the opposition” and to refrain from running. Thus, in a midterm election, the party that does not hold the White House should see an increase in the number of its uncontested House seats.

TIME-SERIES MODELS OF COMPETITION IN HOUSE ELECTIONS, 1912–1994

We test our various hypotheses in the following multiple interruption time series models. These equations should explain the variance in the total number of uncontested House seats, the number of Democratic uncontested House seats, and the number of Republican uncontested House seats:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(Total Uncontested)}_t &= a_t + b_1(1932 \text{ Dummy})_t + \\
&+ b_2(1932 \text{ Counter})_t + b_3(1964 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_4(\text{Midterm})_t + \\
&+ b_5(1966 \text{ Counter})_t + b_6(\text{Redistricting})_t + \\
&+ b_7(1954 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_8(\text{Vote Shift})_t + e_t. \quad (1)
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(Democratic Uncontested)}_t &= a_t + b_1(1932 \text{ Dummy})_t + \\
&+ b_2(1932 \text{ Counter})_t + b_3(1964 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_4(1966 \text{ Counter})_t + \\
&+ b_5(\text{Redistricting})_t + b_6(1954 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_7(\text{Exposure})_t + \\
&+ b_8(\text{Midterm})_t + b_9(\text{Dem Vote Shift})_t + e_t. \quad (2)
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(Republican Uncontested)}_t &= a_t + b_1(1932 \text{ Dummy})_t + \\
&+ b_2(1932 \text{ Counter})_t + b_3(1964 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_4(1966 \text{ Counter})_t + \\
&+ b_5(\text{Redistricting})_t + b_6(1954 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_7(\text{Exposure})_t + \\
&+ b_8(\text{Midterm})_t + b_9(\text{Rep Vote Shift})_t + e_t. \quad (3)
\end{align*}
\]

\[11\] One might argue for inclusion of this variable in a model predicting total uncontested House seats. As the total number of seats up for reelection in each election is always 435 (set in 1911), there would exist no variance by which to calculate a slope coefficient for an equation modeling total uncontested House seats. Limiting our analysis to the 1912 election and those following has the same effect of controlling for the total number of House seats up for election in any given election year. The number of incumbents seeking reelection does vary some.
Uncontested Seats and Electoral Competition for the U.S. House

\[
(Difference \text{ in Uncontested})_t = a_t + b_1(1932 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_2(1932 \text{ Counter})_t + b_3(1964 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_4(1966 \text{ Counter})_t + b_5(\text{Redistricting})_t + b_6(1954 \text{ Dummy})_t + b_7(\text{Exposure Difference})_t + b_8(\text{Midterm})_t + b_9(\text{Vote Shift})_t + e_t.
\]

The multiple interrupted time-series design of the equations allows for tests of changes in the level of competition that are associated with a particular interruption; the coefficients of the dummy variables for particular years reflect these changes in intercepts. This design also allows for tests of changes in the rate at which uncontested House seats occur after a specific interruption, reflected in the coefficients of the counter variables for particular years.

How does each of the independent variables affect competition in House elections from 1912 to 1994? Table 1 displays the results of the time-series analyses for each equation. In general, all three models perform well. Although not all of the coefficients attain conventional levels of statistical significance, most are in the expected direction. The fit statistics are encouraging as well; as demonstrated by the Adjusted $R^2$ statistics, each model accounts for a significant portion of the variance in the respective number of uncontested House seats in any given election from 1912–1994. We treat each model in more detail below.

**Total Uncontested Seats**

Two significant patterns emerge from the analysis of total uncontested House seats (column 1 of Table 1). First, the incidence of a midterm election adds, on average, around 14 uncontested seats. This reflects one influence of presidential politics and popularity on competition for the House. As we argued above, midterm elections do not elicit the same levels of interest from either voters or candidates as do presidential-year elections. Presidential elections are more likely to entice candidates who see an opportunity to ride the coattails of their party's candidate into Congress. Second, the incidence of uncontested seats in House races declines significantly after 1964, reflecting the emergence of the GOP as a viable competitor in the South.

Some of the coefficients that fail to attain conventional levels of statistical significance also are of interest. First, the absolute vote shift in previous elections has no effect on the number of uncontested seats in the current election. 13

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12 The Durbin–Watson statistics are encouraging as well. Estimation of each model generated statistics close to the ideal of 2.

13 We also examined the possibility that potential candidates responded to changes in economic conditions, the basic thesis advanced by Jacobson and Kernell (1981). Because of data limitations, our measure of GDP change in the previous year was only available for the 1929–1994 period, thus reducing the number of cases in our analysis to 32. Running our equations including the GDP change variable (recoded as appropriate in each equation) produced somewhat disappointing results. GDP change was significant only in the Democratic equation, and although the GDP change coefficients in the other equations took the expected signs, they were relatively small and far from traditional levels of statistical significance.
### Table 1

**Multiple Interrupted Time-Series Models for Total, Democratic, and Republican Uncontested House Seats, 1912–1994**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Equation (1)</th>
<th>Equation (2)</th>
<th>Equation (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932 Dummy</td>
<td>1.37 (6.50)*</td>
<td>17.99***</td>
<td>-11.74****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932 Counter</td>
<td>-2.56 (2.20)</td>
<td>-4.50*</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964 Dummy</td>
<td>-18.84*</td>
<td>-18.53*</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>13.74**</td>
<td>(4.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 Counter</td>
<td>.59 (.85)</td>
<td>-1.13 (.71)</td>
<td>1.95***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistricting</td>
<td>-2.01 (2.06)</td>
<td>-1.09 (1.76)</td>
<td>-1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954 Dummy</td>
<td>-12.20 (8.01)</td>
<td>-11.46 (6.83)</td>
<td>-6.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Vote Shift</td>
<td>-.23 (.87)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat Vote Shift</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.19*</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Vote Shift</td>
<td></td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat Exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.78**</td>
<td>(4.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.83**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>80.93***</td>
<td>42.60**</td>
<td>-7.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.05)</td>
<td>(14.31)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Cases</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>5.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durbin-Watson</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in parentheses are standard errors.

*p = .05, **p = .01, ***p = .001, two-tailed tests.

Second, there is no significant trend in the incidence of uncontested House seats over the period when the incumbency advantage was increasing. Third, both the 1932 realignment and redistricting coefficients, although insignificant, are in the expected negative direction, suggesting more competition in the form of fewer uncontested House seats when the political environment is unsettled. Finally, the coefficient for the end of cross-filing in California primaries, which falls just short of traditional levels of significance, suggests that the change did decrease the overall number of uncontested House seats. This should not be a surprise, because cross-filing discouraged competition in a state with a large delegation.

**Democratic Uncontested Seats**

Several general patterns emerge in an analysis of the incidence of the number of House Democrats without major-party opposition (column 2 of Table 1). First, and most striking, is that the rise of the Republican South, as marked by the
1964 presidential election, is associated with a marked increase in the likelihood that Democrats faced Republicans in House elections. On average, 19 fewer Democrats got free rides in House races after Barry Goldwater’s campaign reinvigorated the GOP in the traditionally solid Democratic South. Second, Democrats realized an immediate and significant gain from the 1932 realignment. The realigning election was responsible for an increase in eighteen races in which Democrats had no opposition from Republicans, suggesting that some in the GOP elite did not require much time to read the shift in the political winds. Third, for each point shift towards the Democrats in the previous elections, the party enjoyed one additional uncontested race in the current campaign. In addition, and somewhat surprisingly, the rise of incumbency had little positive impact on the number of uncontested seats occupied by the Democrats. As in the model of total uncontested seats, the incidence of a midterm election with a Republican president significantly decreases opposition to Democratic candidates; Democrats, on average benefit by almost 17 more uncontested seats in midterms in which the GOP holds the White House.

**Republican Uncontested Seats**

There are at least two major similarities in the analysis of the incidence of Republican uncontested House seats (column 3 of Table 1) with the analysis of Democratic uncontested seats. First, the realignment of 1932 is associated with an immediate increase in the level of Democratic opposition to Republicans. Second, the occurrence of a midterm election with a Democrat-controlled White House results in about seven more Republican uncontested House seats. While both statistically and substantively significant, this coefficient is on average less than half that for Democrats.

There are, however, important differences between the findings for the two parties. For every 100 seats it has exposed, the Republicans have had 14 uncontested seats. The Republican model reflects the increasing incumbency advantage starting in 1966; major-party opposition to Republican House candidates decreases at a rate of about two seats in each election year following the rise of incumbency. Republicans, then, enjoyed this benefit of increasing incumbency advantage. Finally, while redistricting has no effect on the number of Democratic uncontested seats, the process has clearly hurt the GOP. Democrats, who controlled more of the redistricting processes, used their opportunities at least to put more Republicans into situations where they found themselves facing opponents.

**The Gap Between the Democrats and the Republicans**

One final question to address is how these different variables might affect the gap between the number of uncontested seats for the two parties. The party with more uncontested seats is advantaged, of course, because it enters election
day with a built-in lead, and if the gap is large it becomes that much harder for
the other party to win enough of the contested seats to gain a majority in the
House.

As shown in Table 2, the difference in the number of uncontested Republican
seats from the number of uncontested Democratic seats is influenced by the
difference in the number of incumbents each party has up for reelection. Simi-
larly, midterm elections exert an effect. From a partisan perspective, perhaps the
most interesting findings are that the 1932 realignment did work to the Demo-
crats' immediate advantage, but the GOP whittled away at that edge over the
succeeding four elections. In addition, as we might expect, the rise of the GOP
in the South in 1964 significantly narrowed the gap in the number of uncontested
seats between the two parties. Finally, a vote shift in the Democrats' direction
widens the uncontested seat gap.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a dynamic element to U.S. House elections over the bulk of the
twentieth century. Our analysis demonstrates independent and significant effects
for the rise of the Republican South in the latter half of the century and the
occurrence of midterm elections. By operationalizing competition in the form of
uncontested seats, this paper strengthens our confidence in the emergence of

TABLE 2

MULTIPLE INTERRUPTED TIME-SERIES MODEL FOR THE DIFFERENCE IN
DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN UNCONTESTED HOUSE SEATS, 1912–1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposure Difference</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>(.04)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932 Dummy</td>
<td>28.71**</td>
<td>(6.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932 Counter</td>
<td>−5.71*</td>
<td>(2.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964 Dummy</td>
<td>−21.94**</td>
<td>(8.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 Counter</td>
<td>−2.98***</td>
<td>(.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>10.64**</td>
<td>(3.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistricting</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>(2.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954 Dummy</td>
<td>−4.18</td>
<td>(8.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Shift Difference</td>
<td>1.39*</td>
<td>(.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>39.71***</td>
<td>(4.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Cases</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>12.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durbin-Watson</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures in parentheses are standard errors.

$p = .05, \quad **p = .01, \quad ***p = .001$, two-tailed tests.
these two phenomena as potent explanations for aggregate congressional election outcomes. We found little evidence that changes in the electoral laws bring about a substantial change in competition on the national level, although we would not want to dismiss that possibility based on the evidence presented here.

The analyses of the individual political parties' uncontested House seats illuminated the dynamic element of competition as well. The frequency with which each major political party is opposed by the other appears to be related to some of the same forces at work in the broader American political system as well as forces specific to each party.

All of this suggests the possibility that the number of uncontested seats in each election may be a rough but useful indicator of elite political behavior. Potential House candidates, as elites, make conscious calculations of both their own chances and their parties' chances in each election, and they act accordingly. As such, the number of uncontested seats may be a useful variable in forecasting elections, at least since the GOP's southern resurgence has made both parties reasonably competitive in each region of the country.14 Certainly, the rise in the number of uncontested races the GOP enjoyed and the decrease in the number of free rides the Democrats have gotten over the last few elections portended the outcome of the 1994 elections.

Finally, as a gauge of the health of the congressional election system in particular and American democracy in general, the number of uncontested seats may provide us a surprising answer. During a period when many analysts see less competition, looking at the number of uncontested seats suggests more competition at this most basic of levels in recent years than at any time since at least the beginning of this century.

APPENDIX

MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Total Uncontested House Seats: Number in election at time t.
Democratic Uncontested House Seats: Number in election at time t.
Republican Uncontested House Seats: Number in election at time t.
Difference in Democratic and Republican Uncontested House Seats: Number of uncontested Democrats minus the number of uncontested Republicans.

14A simple regression with seat swing as the dependent variable and the difference in the number of Democratic and Republican uncontested seats as the independent variable for the 24 elections from 1948 to 1994 produces a substantively large (.44) coefficient that approaches traditional levels of statistical significance (.079 two-tailed).
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

19xx Dummy: Dummy variables coded 0 before 19XX and 1 for 19XX and after.

19xx Counter: Counter variable for interaction years, coded 0 before 19XX and 1, 2, 3, . . . for 19XX and after.

1932 Counter: Counter variable coded 5 for 1932, 4 for 1934, 3 for 1936, 2 for 1938, 1 for 1940, and 0 for each year after.

Exposure (for Democratic and Republican uncontested seats equations): Number of seats held by the party entering a House election at time t.

Exposure Difference: The number of seats held by the Democrats minus the number of seats held by the Republicans at time t.

Midterm: A dummy variable coded 1 for midterm elections and 0 for House elections coinciding with presidential elections.

Midterm (for Democratic and Republican uncontested seats equations): A dummy variable coded 1 for midterm election in which the opposing party held the White House, 0 otherwise.

Midterm (for difference in seats equation): 1 if Republicans held White House during a midterm election, −1 if Democrats held White House during a midterm election, 0 otherwise.

Redistricting: A dummy variable to capture effects of redistricting elections, coded 5 for 1972, 1982, and 1992, 4 for 1974, 1984, and 1994, 3 for 1976 and 1986, . . . , 1 for 1980 and 1990. We only include election years since 1972 because, of course, before several important Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s redistricting did not occur in many states.

Vote Shift: In the overall equation, the vote shift is measured as the absolute change in vote for the two parties between the previous two elections. In the party-specific equations, the vote shift is the shift towards the party. In the difference equation, the vote shift is coded with respect to the Democratic party.

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REFERENCES


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