

Electoral Competition and Democratic Responsiveness: A Defense of the Marginality Hypothesis

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Does vigorous electoral competition help to convert citizens' preferences into government action? No, concludes a series of theoretical and empirical studies conducted over the last 35 years. If these findings are correct, efforts to enhance competition such as depoliticizing the redistricting process and achieving greater equity in campaign spending, while perhaps beneficial in other respects, will not improve government responsiveness. However, these studies are limited by a shortage of data, by biased measures of district competitiveness, and by their conceptualization of responsiveness. Using both cross-sectional and fixed-effects modeling frameworks, this study finds that in recent years elected officials who represent more competitive districts are indeed more responsive to their constituents' preferences.

Once a mainstay of the study of politics, the “marginality hypothesis” has fallen on hard times. As defined by its most ardent critic, the hypothesis argues that, “legislators elected by narrow margins pay closer attention to constituency interests than colleagues elected with plenty of votes to spare” (Fiorina 1973, 479). A host of studies in the 1950s and 1960s lined up behind this claim (e.g., Froman 1963; MacRae 1952). However, the ensuing 35 years have not been kind to this view. A series of efforts have alleged that, in the words of one study, “the marginality hypothesis is wrong” (Groseclose 2001, 863; see also Fiorina 1974; Gulati 2004).

The prospect that vigorous electoral competition may not contribute to linking citizens' opinions to government policies has important consequences for our understanding of the representation mechanism. If competitiveness does not encourage responsiveness to constituents' interests, perhaps citizens can only promote responsiveness by electing like-minded representatives (Bartels 1991; Miller and Stokes 1963). Moreover, many models of policy making are rooted to Downs' spatial model, in which responsiveness (the winning candidate assumes the median voter's ideological location) is tied to competitiveness (voters are evenly split between the candidates; Downs 1957). If

electoral competition is not systematically linked to responsiveness, these models may need to be reexamined.

Additionally, the doubters of the marginality hypothesis would be little concerned about the representational consequences of declining competitiveness in congressional elections. In *The Federalist Papers* No. 52, James Madison claimed that the House of Representatives “should have an immediate dependence on, and an intimate sympathy with, the people” and that “[f]requent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which this dependence and sympathy can be effectually secured.” But are frequent elections enough to promote “dependence” if they are not competitive? Measured various ways, the competitiveness of House elections has been declining for decades, culminating in the reelection of 99% of running House incumbents in the 2002 and 2004 elections (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Mayhew 1974). Some have viewed this trend as “significant precisely because the electoral changes that were occurring had implications for citizen control” (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992, 35; Mayhew 1974). Motivated by concern that the absence of competition breeds complacency among incumbents, initiatives have sprung up to depoliticize the redistricting process and to

bring greater equity to campaign expenditures, among others. However, *the detractors of the marginality hypothesis contend that while electoral competition may have its benefits, greater responsiveness is not one of them*. In other words, much fretting about “vanishing marginals,” the one-party South, and “rigged” districting may not have been in service to improving democratic responsiveness (Key 1949; Mayhew 1974; Murphy 2005).

Before we dismiss concerns about declining competitiveness too hastily, though, we should appreciate that the indictments of the marginality hypothesis rest on a rather sparse evidentiary foundation. Empirical examinations often have relied on one or two years of data, have used dubious measures of district marginality, and have wrongly conflated candidate convergence with responsiveness to constituents. Given these shortcomings, surely this important claim going to the heart of the democratic process merits closer scrutiny.

Using nearly 30 years of data, a measure of district competitiveness that is not endogenous to representation, and both cross-sectional and fixed-effects empirical frameworks, this analysis reevaluates the marginality hypothesis. It uncovers considerable evidence supporting the hypothesis in recent years. Across and within districts, electoral competition encourages legislators to be more responsive to their constituents' preferences.

Background

The earliest statements of the marginality hypothesis were grounded in the intuition that if they wish to be reelected, officials who narrowly gain office must pay greater heed to their constituents' preferences than officials who enjoy larger margins of victory (MacRae 1952). Subsequent work developed a more rigorous *theoretical* account of the marginality hypothesis. For instance, one study showed that in electoral equilibrium, the policy platforms of policy-motivated incumbents can safely deviate from the district median as their valence advantage increases (Wittman 1983). Since district competitiveness is inversely related to an incumbent's valence advantage, this showed how a lack of competitiveness tended to make incumbents less responsive to their median constituent.¹

Early *empirical* studies of the marginality hypothesis tended to show that elected officials who repre-

sented competitive districts were less loyal to their parties—presumably defecting to support roll-call alternatives that their constituents preferred (e.g., Froman 1963; MacRae 1952). Subsequent empirical studies indicated that state assembly members were more responsive to constituents when they represented competitive districts, but only on some issues (Kuklinski 1977), and that *only* among competitive districts, the House candidate closest to the constituency mean was more likely to win the election (Sullivan and Uslaner 1978).² More recent studies claiming to support the marginality hypothesis showed that congressional candidates' policy positions tend to converge in ideologically balanced districts, especially in races involving high-quality candidates or candidates who face tough primary challenges (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004), and that incumbents whose expected vote share is near or below 50% tend to vote more moderately relative to other Members (Erikson and Wright 2000).³

According to the contrary view, in more competitive districts elected officials will pay greater attention to their core supporters, rather than their median constituent (e.g., Fiorina 1973, 1974). Adducing evidence against the marginality hypothesis, Fiorina showed that legislative seats that switched parties in close races resulted in a greater alteration of legislator behavior than party-seat switches in uncompetitive races. Subsequent empirical studies also have concluded that “representatives who win with 100% of the vote appear to be about as responsive to constituency opinion as those who win with 51% of the vote” (Bartels 1991, 468), and that among Senators, “legislators from more marginal states are less responsive to the ideological center than legislators from safe states” (Gulati 2004, 496). Additionally, larger vote margins may not have meant that legislators are more “safe,” at least in an objective sense (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992; Jacobson 1987).⁴ Finally, citing the greater electoral uncertainty incumbents face, and their apparent heightened activity in and devotion of resources to their districts, another study concluded

²The latter finding implied that in less competitive districts, incumbents could be less attentive to the median voter without jeopardizing their reelection chances.

³A literature not usually linked to the marginality hypothesis also shows that once the electoral connection is completely severed via announced retirement, legislators alter their roll-call behavior (e.g., Rothenberg and Sanders 2000).

⁴Legislators' voting behavior might still be affected by their *subjective* sense that they are not safe when they represent more competitive districts (Mayhew 1974), and even relatively safe districts (Fenno 1978).

¹As Wittman wrote, policy-motivated legislators can “trade[] off some added probability of winning for a more desirable policy position [compared to that of the median voter]” (1983, 146).

that, “there is simply no evidence that larger election margins have made today’s incumbents less responsive to their constituencies than were those of yesteryear. One of the concerns underlying the vanishing marginals literature has not been realized” (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992, 27–28). These empirical studies have been buttressed by theoretical work showing that compared to an incumbent with no valence advantage, a modestly valence-advantaged candidate actually will locate nearer the median voter, if the advantage remains small (Groseclose 2001).

The evidence bearing on the marginality hypothesis is decidedly mixed. At the same time, extant studies of the hypothesis often suffer from a number of shortcomings, including a paucity of data, poor measures of competitiveness, and a tendency to conflate candidate convergence with responsiveness. Several prominent studies speaking to the marginality hypothesis are based on one or two years of data (Bartels 1991; Fiorina 1974; Kuklinski 1977; MacRae 1952), but patterns of responsiveness can change over time (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). A second concern is the frequent measurement of district marginality using district congressional election data (Bartels 1991; Kuklinski 1977; MacRae 1952). As some have pointed out, this measure makes it difficult to separate marginality’s effect on representation and representation’s effect on marginality (Gulati 2004; Sullivan and Uslaner 1978). Finally, several analyses measure responsiveness using candidate convergence, either toward another candidate (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Burden 2004; Sullivan and Uslaner 1978), or toward the House median (Erikson and Wright 2000). However, without imposing some additional assumptions, knowing that two candidates in a district are nearer to each other than are two candidates in another district does not tell us where these candidates stand with respect to their district’s median voter. Nor is evidence that an incumbent votes more moderately compared to other Members of Congress reliable evidence that the incumbent is closer to her district’s median voter (Fiorina 1974).

To address these concerns, this analysis assesses the marginality hypothesis using nearly thirty years of data, much more information than earlier studies have relied upon. The study also adopts a measure of district competitiveness that is not endogenous to representation, using presidential election competitiveness in the district. Finally, this analysis measures responsiveness directly, rather than using candidate convergence as a proxy for responsiveness.

There are also theoretical reasons to expect that the relationship between competitiveness and respon-

siveness has sharpened in recent years. First, the Groseclose (2001) model predicts that once the valence advantage of incumbents grows sufficiently large, incumbents become less responsive.⁵ There are several reasons to anticipate that incumbents’ advantage over challengers has grown, boosting the relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness. Some argue that incumbents have been made increasingly safe by the heavily politicized redistricting process. “Republicans are increasingly surrounded by other Republicans and Democrats by other Democrats” (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006, 79; see also Murphy 2005). In addition, incumbents’ financial advantage over challengers appears to have extended in the last decade or so.⁶ These factors may contribute to the well-documented increase in the incumbency advantage (Gelman and King 1990; see also Levitt and Wolfram 1997).

Another change in the political landscape that justifies revisiting the marginality hypothesis is the Republican takeover of the House in 1994. Being in the majority usually implies that a party is holding most of the country’s more competitive seats. To remain in the majority, Republican leaders need the party’s most vulnerable members to be especially attentive to their district’s preferences. At the same time, the leadership has pursued an ambitious policy agenda, which requires leaning on less vulnerable members to support the party’s proposals even when constituents may not have been enthusiastic about them. Taken together, these strategies would have the effect of boosting the relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness among Republican Members of Congress, relative to the pre-1994 era.

Approaches to the Study of Responsiveness

This analysis adopts two modeling approaches to assess whether elected officials are more responsive to constituents when they represent competitive districts. *Cross-district* studies usually examine whether

⁵According to the Groseclose model, a modestly valence-advantaged candidate will locate somewhat nearer the expected district median, but “as [the] advantage grows larger, the slope of her policy-location function eventually changes signs” (Groseclose 2001, 867).

⁶Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning found that, “between the 1992–94 election cycle and the 2000–2002 election cycle, median spending by incumbents in high-risk districts rose from \$596,000 to \$910,000 while median spending by challengers in high-risk districts fell from \$229,000 to \$198,000” (2006, 83–84).

the more liberal (conservative) legislators in Congress tend to represent the nation's more liberal (conservative) citizens (e.g., Achen 1978; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Erikson and Wright 2000). Achen termed this "responsiveness" (1978). In this approach, measures of legislator behavior, usually roll-call scores, are regressed on district preferences to assess the "fit" of Congress' ideological composition, relative to the range of opinions across congressional districts.

In contrast, *within-district* studies of representation assess legislators' responsiveness to changing citizen preferences within their districts. Rather than comparing the fit of legislators and citizens cross-sectionally, these studies trace the movement of legislators and constituents within districts over time. Of course, legislator responsiveness to changing voter opinion is only possible if both voters' preferences and legislators' behavior are seen to vary temporally. The district-level preferences of voters, while generally stable, are regularly changed by the mobilization and demobilization of voters, and more slowly by elite actors such as the news media (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and electoral campaigns (Gerber and Jackson 1993). The possibility that elite behavior affects citizens' attitudes is discussed further below. Although legislators' roll-call behavior also is considerably stable over time, a number of studies find evidence of substantial ideological shift among long-term legislators (e.g., Stratmann 2000; Wood and Andersson 1998). In sum, these studies demonstrate that both the median voter in districts and Representatives' mean roll-call behavior vary, albeit somewhat modestly, over time.

Other work has taken advantage of this over-time variance in voters' preferences and officials' decisions to ask if one predicts the other—if Senators (Wood and Andersson 1998; Stratmann 2000), Representatives (Stratmann 2000), and even Justices (Flemming and Wood 1997) adapt their behavior to change in citizens' preferences. These studies find that officials generally make small adaptations in their behavior based on changing citizen attitudes.

Data

This study assesses whether district competitiveness amplifies the relationship between citizens' preferences and House Representatives' roll-call behavior from the 93rd through the 106th Congresses (1972–2000). This time period was selected so as to include three complete intervals between redistrictings and to avoid the frequent redistrictings of the 1960s following *Baker v. Carr*. This analysis requires measures of leg-

islators' roll-call decisions over time, voters' preferences at the level of the congressional district, and district competitiveness.

To measure each Representative's *Roll-Call Liberalism*, I rely on first dimension D-NOMINATE coordinates (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). These scores have the advantage of being comparable across Congresses, allow for linear change in voting behavior over time, and are estimated separately for each Congress based on votes cast in each term.⁷ The scores range from –1 to +1, and have been reflected so that higher scores indicate greater roll-call liberalism.

My data on *District Liberalism* are each congressional district's two-party, Democratic presidential vote share as reported by the Census Bureau. Studies of representation have frequently relied on presidential vote shares to measure citizens' preferences (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Rothenberg and Sanders 2000).⁸ In fact, the most recent effort to measure citizens' preferences in congressional districts, a Bayesian latent variable model that incorporated district demographic characteristics and electoral returns, concluded that, "at least in recent elections . . . presidential vote shares are extremely reliable indicators of district preferences" (Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman 2005, 42). Finally, Representatives also likely refer to the presidential voting patterns in their district as one important indicator of their constituents' preferences and their district's competitiveness.

The presidential vote measure I use has been *normalized* to represent each district's deviation from the mean Democratic vote share each election year, greatly enhancing the measure's comparability across years (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). For instance, in the nation as a whole, 68% of voters favored Richard Nixon in 1972, while 48% supported Gerald Ford in 1976. In both cases, some districts voted more heavily Democratic than other districts, so we can conclude that these districts are more heavily

⁷Other versions of NOMINATE adopt an "overlapping generations" approach in which roll calls in other terms served are used to estimate Representatives' locations.

⁸Prior studies employing presidential vote shares to measure constituent preferences have not fully appreciated that it is a vote-based measure. Recent comparisons of voter and nonvoter preferences disaggregated to the state level have revealed that the preferences of voters and nonvoters may be less alike than is commonly presumed (Griffin and Newman 2005). To the extent that voters are appreciably different from nonvoters, this study analyzes whether legislators' responsiveness to *voters* has declined over time, because only voters participate in presidential elections.

TABLE 1 Effect of District Competitiveness on Responsiveness across Districts, 93rd–106th Congresses

	All	All	Nonsouth	Presidential Year
District Liberalism	3.27** [.070]	1.265** [.043]	1.168** [.046]	1.182** [.058]
District Competitiveness	.156 [.064]	.050 [.036]	.186** [.042]	.077 [.049]
District Liberalism * District Competitiveness	4.417** [.305]	.865** [.175]	.666** [.182]	.606** [.231]
MC Democrat	—	.543** [.005]	.584** [.005]	.537** [.007]
Constant	.045** [.006]	-.279** [.005]	-.264** [.005]	-.272** [.006]
N	5,693	5,685	4,167	3,064
R ²	.49	.84	.87	.83

Standard errors in brackets. **denotes $p < .01$. 98th Congress omitted from all models.

Democratic or liberal than those that consistently voted more Republican despite the difference in pairs of candidates. Before normalizing, the data were adjusted to account for home state effects.⁹ Due to its normalization, the measure of district preferences has a mean approximating zero, with positive values indicating more liberal districts and negative values indicating more conservative districts.

Because Representative roll-call behavior is measured every two years and district liberalism is measured every four years, in some of the reported models district liberalism is linearly interpolated for presidential midterm years. However, there is one year in which it is not appropriate to interpolate this data—1982. The reason is that a presidential election did not coincide with the congressional redistricting in that year, as it did in 1972 and 1992. To interpolate district liberalism using the 1980 election would result in the measurement of district liberalism and roll-call behavior using two different geographic constituencies, so this year is not used in the interpolated data analyses. I also report some results in which only presidential election year data are used, to be certain that interpolation is not driving the results.

Many previous studies measure *District Competitiveness* using the incumbent's share of the vote in the most recent election (e.g., Bartels 1991; Kuklinski 1977; MacRae 1952). This is problematic in models of representation, because district competitiveness will be affected by how constituents were represented in

the prior term.¹⁰ Others have recognized this and used alternative measures of district competitiveness (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Gulati 2004; Sullivan and Uslander 1978). Following these studies, I use district presidential voting patterns to measure district competitiveness—specifically the absolute value of the normalized district presidential vote measure in a given year, then reflected so that more competitive districts will take on greater values. This measure always takes on negative values, with less negative values indicating greater district competitiveness. In some of the models reported below, this value also is interpolated for midterm election years other than 1982.

Results

I present three sets of results. First, I assess whether competitiveness improves responsiveness across districts using pooled cross-sectional data. Then, I estimate year-by-year models of responsiveness as a function of competitiveness. Finally, I evaluate whether competitiveness affects responsiveness within districts over time.

Competitiveness and Responsiveness across Districts, Pooled Analyses

Table 1, column 1 reports the results of a pooled, cross-section regression of Representatives' D-NOMINATE coordinates on district liberalism, district competitiveness, and the product of these factors using data from 1972 to 2000. If the estimate for the interaction term in this model is positive, this

⁹Specifically, I estimated the size of the home-state advantage by comparing home-state support of the two major party presidential candidates with the state's support for the same-party candidate in the previous election. These comparisons suggested that home states tend to inflate their support on average about 5 percentage points. Districts with home-state Democratic presidential candidates thus were adjusted 5 percentage points downward, while districts with home state Republican presidential candidates were adjusted 5 percentage points upward.

¹⁰Moreover, "an incumbent's margin of victory in the previous election is not as good an indicator of prospects in the next election as it once was" (Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992, 27).

indicates that district competitiveness magnifies the relationship between district liberalism and Representative roll-call liberalism. The results of the model reveal that, indeed, district competitiveness promotes responsiveness.¹¹ A second model controls for Representatives' party affiliations (Democrat coded 1, Republican 0), given the tendency for liberal districts to elect Democrats and for party affiliations to predict legislators' roll-call behavior.¹² Even after accounting for the mediating role of Members' party affiliations, competitiveness still has a direct effect on responsiveness (column 2).

Those familiar with the unique path of politics in the American South could contend that this pattern of responsiveness is owing to frequent support for Republican presidential candidates in that region, coupled with entrenched support for congressional Democrats. Since 1960, the GOP has won a majority of the two-party presidential vote in the South in every election but 1976 (e.g., Lublin 2004). However, greater GOP success at the presidential level was slow to spread to congressional races, such that it was not until 1994 that a majority of Southern Representatives was affiliated with the Republican Party (Lublin 2004). Even though Southern Democrats voted somewhat more conservatively than their Northern Democratic counterparts over this period, their moderate conservatism did not keep pace with the shift toward the GOP in presidential elections. Therefore, the South is a region where district liberalism, as measured by presidential voting, may not be well "matched" with Representative roll-call liberalism. To guard against the possibility that the results in column 1 are largely a function of these patterns, the model was reestimated among non-Southern districts. The results of this estimation indicate that, even outside the South, Representatives who hailed from more competitive districts have been more responsive to differences in district liberalism (Table 1, column 3).

The results of an estimation that does not interpolate data between presidential election years is also reported. As many prior studies have observed, the electorate in midterm elections is substantially different in size and character than in presidential election years, with strong partisans much more likely to vote than others (e.g., Campbell 1960). As a consequence, in midterm years we might expect that a competitive-

ness measure based on presidential-year voting may contain greater measurement error, dampening the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness. On the other hand, Representatives likely are more sensitive to district competitiveness in off years, when their electoral fortunes are more closely tied to their performance rather than their party's success in the presidential race. To test these countervailing expectations, the initial model was reestimated using only presidential election-year data. The results indicate that interpolating district liberalism in midterm years is not very consequential—although the link between competitiveness and responsiveness appears stronger in midterm years, in presidential election years responsiveness also is greater in more competitive districts (column 4).¹³

Finally, what has been characterized as evidence of greater legislator responsiveness in competitive districts might instead be interpreted as evidence that Representatives' roll-call liberalism has a greater effect on district liberalism in more competitive districts. Prior studies have shown that on specific issues, the manner in which elected officials take positions can affect their constituents' preferences (Hill and Hurley 1999). We also might expect that citizens will pay greater attention to the political environment in more competitive districts, for two reasons. First, political parties strategically devote greater resources to these districts, providing citizens with more information (Cox and Munger 1989). Second, citizens' subjective perceptions that their vote matters more in competitive districts might boost citizen interest in politics (Filer and Kenney 1980). Based on this knowledge, Table 1 might reflect the effect of previous roll-call voting (which is highly correlated with current roll-call voting) on district liberalism, as conditioned by district competitiveness. On the other hand, prior studies have yet to show that district *liberalism*, as opposed to citizens' positions on *specific issues*, is influenced by legislators' roll-call voting. It seems much less likely that citizens' general ideological outlooks are as malleable as specific issue opinions. Moreover, like other studies this analysis measures district liberalism using the presidential election *prior to* a Representative's modeled roll-call behavior.¹⁴ Both of

¹¹Adding year dummies to the models does not substantially alter the results from those reported.

¹²There is also a systematic relationship between Member party affiliation and district competitiveness in the data, with Republicans more likely to represent uncompetitive districts.

¹³As we would expect from the results reported in Table 1, the parameter estimate for the interaction term in midterm years (1.19, $p < .01$) is nearly twice as large as in presidential election years.

¹⁴To disentangle the directionality of citizens' attitudes and Senators' and Justices' voting decisions, Wood and Andersson (1998, 717) and Flemming and Wood (1997, 473) lagged citizen attitudes one period.

FIGURE 1(a) District Liberalism and Democrats' Roll Call Liberalism, by District Competitiveness, 1972–2000

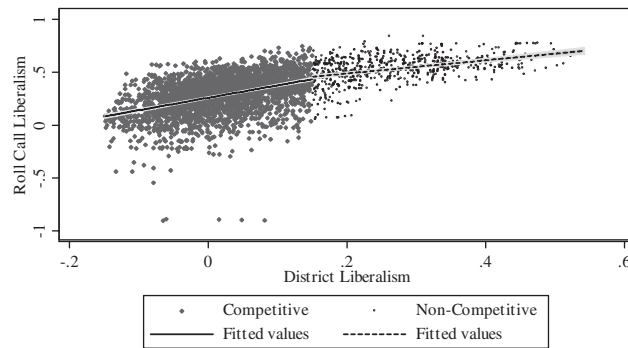
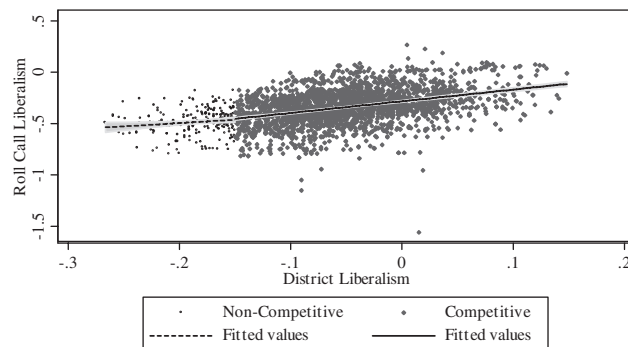


FIGURE 1(b) District Liberalism and Republicans' Roll Call Liberalism, by District Competitiveness, 1972–2000



these considerations should provide some reassurance that the results primarily reflect the effect of district liberalism, conditioned by competitiveness, on legislator roll-call liberalism, rather than the reverse.

Next, to illustrate the *substantive* effect of district competition on responsiveness among Democrats and Republicans, two scatter plots using data from 1972 to 2000 are presented in Figures 1a–b.¹⁵ The dashed line in each panel represents the relationship between district liberalism and Representative roll-call liberalism among less competitive districts; the solid line represents the relationship among more competitive districts.¹⁶ The shaded area surrounding each line represents the 95% confidence interval. Among

¹⁵Thirty-four Republicans who represented very liberal districts and 53 Democrats who represented very conservative districts were omitted from these plots so that these outlying observations did not steer the plotting of the trend lines. Omitting these cases from the models in Table 1 does not substantially alter the results.

¹⁶Competitive districts are defined as those where the winning presidential candidate received no more than 65% of the two-party vote.

Democrats, the effect of district liberalism on Representative roll-call liberalism has been quite a bit more substantial in more competitive districts, as indicated by the much steeper slope of the solid line. Among Republicans, competitiveness also improves responsiveness, albeit somewhat more weakly.

To generate more precise predictions, I simulated expected D-NOMINATE scores as uncompetitive and competitive districts become more liberal using the estimates from Table 1 column 1. In a district that is one standard deviation (.08) less competitive than the mean (–.08) as district liberalism changes from moderate (0) to somewhat liberal (.1), the predicted D-NOMINATE score of a Representative increases .253.¹⁷ By comparison, in a district one standard deviation more competitive than the mean, an identical difference in district liberalism results in a .326 change in the predicted D-NOMINATE score. As will be seen below, the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness has been much greater in recent years. For example, simulating an identical change in district liberalism during the 106th Congress yields a .318 change in predicted D-NOMINATE score in a district one standard deviation less competitive than the mean, and a .492 change in predicted D-NOMINATE score in a district one standard deviation more competitive than the mean.

Year-by-Year Models of Competitiveness and Responsiveness

I developed two reasons to anticipate that the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness may have sharpened in recent years. First, theoretical models of candidate competition predict that when the incumbency advantage is sufficiently large, incumbents will diverge from their district median (Groseclose 2001; Wittman 1983), and the incumbency advantage has increased over time (Gelman and King 1990). Second, the Republican takeover of the House in 1994 may have led to two strategies by its leadership that would have boosted the link between competitiveness and responsiveness among the party's members—encouraging its vulnerable members to be attentive to district concerns and its less vulnerable members to support the party's policy agenda.

To examine whether there has been temporal variation in the relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness, year-by-year OLS models were estimated, once again excluding the 98th Congress.

¹⁷Marginal effects were calculated using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003).

FIGURE 2 Effect of Competitiveness on Responsiveness, by Party and Year

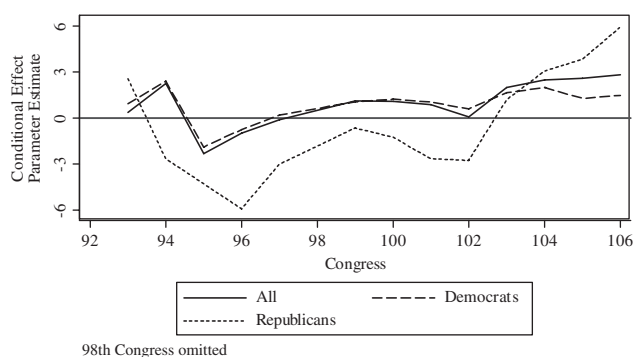


Figure 2 reports the parameter estimates for the conditional effect in each model, where positive values once again indicate that competitiveness magnifies the effect of district liberalism on roll-call liberalism. Looking first at the trend line for all Representatives, the figure reveals that the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness chiefly emerged in the 1990s. Prior to this, there was only a weak relationship between the two; indeed, only the estimates for the 103rd–106th Congresses are statistically significant at $p < .05$. One reason this result is important is that it helps to explain why many prior studies yield null findings of the marginality hypothesis—they are simply out of date.

The separate trend lines in Figure 2 for each party's members allow us to assess the explanations for the heightened effect of competitiveness on responsiveness observed in the 1990s among all Representatives. If a growth in the incumbency advantage accounts for this, we would expect to observe an increase in the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness from the 102nd to the 103rd Congress among *both* Democrats and Republicans since incumbents from both parties benefit from redistricting. If the Republican takeover of the House explains the steeper relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness, we would expect to observe that Republicans, but not Democrats, became more responsive to electoral competition after 1994.

There is some evidence in the data supporting both explanations. First, from the 102nd to the 103rd Congress, or immediately after the 1992 redistricting, there was an increase in the relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness among the members of both parties, especially among Republicans. This pattern tends to support the incumbency advantage argument. However, in the 104th Congress and in subsequent Congresses the relationship between competitiveness and responsiveness continued to grow among

Republicans, but flattened out among Democrats. This pattern tends to support the Republican takeover argument. In the interest of space, a full analysis of these explanations is left for future research.

Competitiveness and Responsiveness within Districts

It is one thing to find that competitiveness is related to responsiveness across districts. It is quite another to find that as competitiveness fluctuates within districts, individual legislators alter their responsiveness. Such evidence would greatly increase our confidence that responsiveness genuinely is altered by competitiveness. The final set of estimations employs a fixed-effects framework to assess how district competitiveness affects Representatives' adaptation of their roll-call behavior as their district liberalism changes.

Specifically, I imbed the analyses in a fixed-effects framework with the Member the fixed effect and the unit of observation the Member-Congress, as in Levitt (1996), Wood and Andersson (1998), and Stratmann (2000). This research design leverages off variability in district liberalism to isolate the causal relationship between changing district liberalism and legislator roll-call liberalism within districts over time. An advantage of this approach is that the fixed effect accounts for legislator-specific factors that affect roll-call decisions but are omitted from the analysis due to time invariance or difficulty of measurement, including legislators' own ideological predispositions (Levitt 1996; Stratmann 2000; Wood and Andersson 1998).

To account for redistricting in each of the study's three decades, the congressional districts in the fixed-effects models take on unique identifiers during the periods 1972–80, 1984–90, and 1992–2000.¹⁸ In other words, at the end of each decade every district “dies” and new districts are “born.” So, a Member who represents the same district in two terms straddling a redistricting is treated as if he/she begins a new period of service in the post-redistricting term. Note that these models do not control for Representatives' party affiliations because there is too little variation within districts—Members of Congress seldom switch parties.

The results of the first estimation (Table 2, column 1) show that as competitiveness within districts increases, legislators become more responsive to change in their district's liberalism. The interaction

¹⁸Recall that a measure of district liberalism is unavailable for 1982–83.

TABLE 2 Effect of District Competitiveness on Responsiveness within Districts, 93rd–106th Congresses

Districts	All	Nonsouth	All	All	All
Period	1972–2000	1972–2000	1972–1980	1984–1990	1992–2000
District Liberalism	.123** [.020]	.177** [.024]	.094** [.019]	.130** [.027]	.129** [.048]
District Competitiveness	.012 [.015]	-.009 [.020]	.043** [.016]	-.053 [.022]	-.118** [.033]
District Liberalism * District Competitiveness	.265** [.078]	.429** [.085]	.119 [.083]	.332** [.094]	.819** [.172]
Constant	.038** [.001]	.066** [.002]	.075** [.001]	.043** [.002]	-.024** [.003]
N	5,693	4,174	2,192	1,731	1,770

Fixed-effects regressions. Dependent variable is D-NOMINATE score. Standard errors in brackets. **denotes $p < .01$. 98th Congress omitted from models in columns 1 and 2.

term is positive and statistically significant at a .01 level. This finding is consistent with work showing that ideologically moderate Senators (who presumably emerge from ideologically moderate, and thus more competitive, states) are more responsive to change in voters' preferences (Wood and Andersson 1998). It is also consistent with the prior finding that more junior legislators are more responsive than their senior colleagues (Levitt 1996), because we usually associate competitive districts with more junior legislators.

The model then was estimated among nonsouthern districts. These results showed that even outside the South, responsiveness within districts increases as competitiveness increases (column 2). To determine if the evidence in Figure 2 of a stronger relationship in recent years between competitiveness and responsiveness across districts was accompanied by a stronger relationship within districts, separate models were estimated for each decade. These models show that within districts the effect of competitiveness on responsiveness has grown as well.¹⁹

Finally, the substantive effect of competitiveness on responsiveness within districts was examined. Using the estimates reported in the first column of Table 2, we can predict that a Representative who hailed from a district with that was average in its liberalism and competitiveness was expected to hold a D-NOMINATE score of .044. By comparison, a Representative who hailed from a district that was one standard deviation more liberal and one standard deviation more competitive was expected to hold a D-NOMINATE score of .058, while a Representative from a district that was one standard deviation more

liberal, and one standard deviation less competitive was expected to hold a D-NOMINATE score of .051. We can reach two conclusions from this: (1) changes in district liberalism exert modest effects on legislator roll-call liberalism within districts, which is consistent with prior studies (e.g., Wood and Andersson 1998); and (2) the effect of changes in district liberalism on roll-call liberalism within districts is about twice as large in competitive districts, compared to noncompetitive districts.

Conclusion

This study has produced considerable evidence supporting the claim that more competitive districts induce greater responsiveness among elected officials. Specifically, it has shown that across and within districts, the link between district liberalism and Representative roll-call liberalism is stronger among more competitive districts. These results are robust to the exclusion of Southern districts and data from midterm election years.

This study's finding that competitiveness boosts responsiveness shows that, contrary to what the detractors of the marginality hypothesis would claim, there are real representational costs to the declining competitiveness of congressional elections (e.g., Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Mayhew 1974). From a system perspective, if the "fundamental democratic function" of congressional elections is to "keep[] members in line with the general policy preferences of their districts (Erikson and Wright 2000, 177)," these results indicate that elections are not performing this function as well today as they were when elections were more competitive. In the words of Madison, less competitive elections mean they are less useful for creating in Members a "habitual recollection of their dependence upon the people" (*Federalist* 57). From the perspective of citizens' political equality,

¹⁹Results of fixed-effects models by party also mirror the cross district results in Figure 2, with Republicans again more sensitive than Democrats to district competitiveness (parameter estimates for the interaction term were .72 and .29, respectively).

individuals who reside in less competitive districts are, on average, not represented as well as citizens who reside in more competitive districts, contrary to what they may believe.²⁰

These findings also validate initiatives to enhance electoral competitiveness. For instance, in the November 2005 elections the residents of California and Ohio declined to join six other states in transferring redistricting authority for congressional districts from the state legislature to “independent” commissions.²¹ Backers of these efforts were motivated, at least rhetorically, by a desire to enhance electoral competitiveness (Murphy 2005). Tellingly, the Ohio initiative provided that “a primary criterion to be utilized by the new commission in creating legislative districts would be to ensure that the districts are competitive,” and projected districts based on California Proposition 77 would have been more competitive.²² Campaign finance reform, too, has been tied to greater electoral competition: “The goal of effective campaign finance reform is to . . . promote competition, freedom, and a more informed electorate (Doolittle 1999, 53). In sum, attempts to reform the districting process and campaign financing may be limited in their ability to improve electoral competitiveness, but these analyses underscore that these efforts to improve competition in hopes of boosting responsiveness are not misguided.

This study also implies that if aggregate district competitiveness has declined over time, as some have argued (Mayhew 1974), then all else equal, aggregate responsiveness has declined. Indeed, calculating mean district competitiveness from 1972 to 1996 from the data used here shows that there has been a steady erosion of district competitiveness over this period.²³ However, while competitiveness has declined, other trends have been improving responsiveness (Erikson and Wright 2000). Even if responsiveness has generally improved over the last several decades, the present

analysis suggests that it likely would have improved *even more* had district competitiveness not declined. To test this proposition, two models were estimated.²⁴ First, in competitive districts Representatives’ D-NOMINATE scores were regressed on their district’s liberalism, the observation year, the product of these factors, and their party affiliations. In this model, the parameter estimate for the interaction term was positive and significant, meaning that among competitive districts, legislator responsiveness to citizens’ preferences has improved over time, consistent with what Erikson and Wright (2000) showed. The model then was reestimated among uncompetitive districts, with starkly different results. According to these models, responsiveness has improved *only* in competitive districts.

This analysis serves as a reminder that, in the words of V.O. Key, “the public weal is best served by [contenders for office] that compete on more or less even terms” (1949, 15). For Key, the public weal surely included a healthy amount of government responsiveness to citizens’ preferences. Future investigations might build on this evidence by improving our understanding of how competitiveness produces responsiveness.

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²⁰According to the California statewide database director for redistricting, “People always say it would be great to have competitive districts. But you talk to them for two minutes about what that would mean, and in the end they say ‘I don’t want to live in a competitive district, but everyone else should’ . . . because in a competitive district they might not get what they want” (quoted in Murphy 2005, 28).

²¹Redistricting commissions for congressional districts are used in Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey, and Washington. Indiana employs a commission if the legislature is unable to pass a plan.

²²The text of these initiatives was obtained from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

²³See additional analyses at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>.

²⁴See additional analyses at <http://www.journalofpolitics.org>.

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