Campaign Rhetoric and the Incumbency Advantage

James N. Druckman[1], Martin J. Kifer[2] [iD],
and Michael Parkin[3]

Abstract

The congressional incumbency advantage reflects an inequity in competition—candidates receive an electoral edge simply because they hold office. Scholars have identified an array of factors that contribute to the incumbency advantage; however, the role of electoral campaigns has been largely ignored. We argue that campaigns are a mechanism through which the incumbency advantage works. All else constant, incumbents focus their campaigns on factors that reflect their standing position, such as their familiarity to voters and actions taken for their district/state. Voters consequently rely on such incumbency factors when making their decisions. The outcome is challengers are at an extreme disadvantage, and campaigns offer scant substantive engagement. We offer evidence for these dynamics with a large-scale content analysis of campaign websites and an experiment. In so doing, we highlight a challenge to theories of democratic representation that focus on equal competition and/or substantive campaign engagement.

[1]Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA
[2]High Point University, NC, USA
[3]Oberlin College, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:
Martin J. Kifer, High Point University, One University Parkway, Drawer #34, High Point, NC 27268, USA.
Email: mkifer@highpoint.edu

Competition is fundamental to democracy because it ensures choice for citizens and facilitates electoral accountability. Substantial scholarship shows how institutions, particularly electoral systems, influence the nature of competition and can, at times, privilege certain office seekers. One widely discussed manifestation concerns the "incumbency advantage" in U.S. congressional elections. This refers to the electoral benefit a candidate receives simply due to being an incumbent, holding all else constant. Various measures show that the incumbency advantage has fluctuated between roughly 2% and 12% of votes since the 1950s (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, & Stewart, 2000; Fowler & Hall, 2014; Gelman & King, 1990; Jacobson, 2015; Lee, 2008).[1]

How does this advantage affect congressional campaign rhetoric, and how does this rhetoric influence voters? Surprisingly, these questions have received scant attention, as most have focused on other aspects of incumbency dynamics such as candidate selection, challenger quality, spending, *inter alia*.[2] In what follows, we argue that the advantage incentivizes incumbents to largely ignore challengers, issues, and even candidates' images. Instead, their campaigns focus on their own experience, ties to the district/state, and their provision of benefits for the district/state: factors on which incumbents are inherently advantaged. Voters, in turn, focus on those criteria, putting aside policy and perceptions of candidates' traits. The consequence is minimal campaign engagement—which is so important for promissory representation (e.g., Druckman, 2014; Mansbridge, 2004) and democratic competition more generally (Disch, 2011; Garsten, 2009; cf. Fowler, 2016). Furthermore, voters consequently decide on criteria that have little connection to what one might consider evidence of substantive representation. In essence, campaigns are a key *mechanism* through which the incumbency advantage operates, and this is problematic for those concerned with campaign engagement and democratic competition.

The Incumbency Advantage and Election Campaigns

The congressional incumbency advantage is one of the most widely studied topics in American politics (Carson, Engstrom, & Roberts, 2007). It reflects, in part, an incumbent's experience in office, familiarity (i.e., ties to the district), and the provision of benefits for the district (e.g., casework, pork barrel projects; e.g., Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009; Fiorina, 1989; Fowler, 2018; Fowler & Hall, 2014; Gronke, 2001; Jacobson, 2013; Mann & Wolfinger, 1980). These factors inherently favor

the incumbent due to serving in the institution; holding office itself is experience, and working on behalf of the district (i.e., taking actions for it) breeds familiarity. Challengers lack the institutional access available to incumbents. This leads to a clear hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Voters view incumbents, relative to challengers, as possessing more experience and familiarity, and as having taken more actions for the district (i.e., "*incumbency factors*"), all else constant.

What this means for campaign rhetoric follows straightforwardly. Incumbents have an advantage when it comes to experience, familiarity, and district actions, and, thus, most of their campaign rhetoric will focus on those considerations (see Jacobson, 2013). Although not identical, this is similar to Fenno's (1978) homestyle, which entails explanation of Washington activities (e.g., experience), presentation of self (e.g., familiarity), and allocation of resources (e.g., district actions). We, thus, will refer to this strategy as "homestyle"—the use of the homestyle strategy is meant to prime voters to rely on incumbency factors (experience, familiarity, district actions) in their vote decisions.

The job for the challenger is to shift voters' attention away from incumbency factors to other criteria on which voters sometimes rely; this includes the proximity of the candidates' policy positions to their own and the candidates' traits (i.e., perceived honesty, empathy, and leadership; Druckman et al., 2009; Jacobson, 2013, 2015). Challengers can do this by discussing the incumbent in a negative light; negativity is a way to stimulate attention, which might be necessary to alert voters to move from their fallback reliance on incumbency features (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010; Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Challengers also will emphasize *issues* and candidates' *images*. In contrast to incumbency factors, a challenger might be preferred when it comes to policy and/or traits (see Jacobson, 2013); all else constant, those are the criteria on which challengers prefer voters to rely. Challengers then will be more apt to use what we call an "issue/image" strategy.

How do these types of campaign rhetoric influence voters? Consider four premises. First, as we intimated, unless particularly motivated, voters rely on incumbency criteria, which are easy to access and process (Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, & Friedenberg, 2018; Fowler, 2018; Mann & Wolfinger, 1980). When they are motivated to systematically process, voters will assess candidates' policy positions and traits, which take more cognitive resources to assess. Second, voters are more likely to engage in systematic processing and consider policy and traits when they perceive there to be

competition (Chong & Druckman, 2007).[3] Third, in congressional elections, active campaigns lead voters to perceive increased competition (Bowler & Donovan, 2011; McDonald & Tolbert, 2012). And fourth, activity by the incumbent is the clearest signal of competition—this occurs when an *incumbent* acknowledges the opponent, goes negative, and employs an issue/image strategy. Put another away, voters fall back to incumbency factors unless they perceive a costly signal such as an active campaign by the incumbent (e.g., Carter & Patty, 2015). An engaged campaign by the challenger, on its own, is insufficient because voters recognize challengers have little choice but to critique the incumbent's record and image (Jacobson, 2013). We, thus, hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 2:** When an incumbent uses an issue/image strategy, voters are more likely to view the election as competitive or close, all else constant.
> **Hypothesis 3:** Moreover, when this happens, voters will be more likely to base their votes on policy and candidate trait perceptions, all else constant.

These hypotheses accentuate how campaign rhetoric can serve as a mechanism for the incumbency bias. Incumbents hold disproportionate power because they enter campaigns advantaged, given voters' fallback is to rely on incumbency factors. And then, holding other factors constant, it is only incumbent rhetoric that can prime voters to consider policy and candidate traits. The result is an equilibrium of a disengaged campaign and voters ignoring factors that drive substantive campaign dialogue (i.e., issues). As an aside, we recognize that other forces such as poll results and media attention can alter voter decision making; yet, we focus strictly on the impact of campaign rhetoric so as to demonstrate its role, all else constant, in perpetuating the incumbency advantage.

What Do Candidates Do?

Here, we offer evidence that candidates campaign as we suggested: Incumbents employ a homestyle strategy of emphasizing familiarity, experience, and district actions, whereas challengers go negative and emphasize issues/image. We follow Druckman et al. (2009) by offering a content analysis of congressional candidate websites during the 2010 campaign. We focus on 2010 because, as will be clear below, our tests of the hypotheses come from a 2010 congressional campaign.

Websites, despite a relatively low number of visitors, provide an ideal measure of campaign behavior by offering a holistic portrait of a campaign's message aimed at general voters.[4] We drew a stratified random sample of major party House and Senate candidates; it was stratified to ensure regional variation as well as some continuity with a larger overtime project. The total sample included 369 sites.[5] We hired a team of coders who participated in training and practice, and then were assigned sets of sites to code. We provided detailed instructions for coding a large array of features over the entire self-contained site. This included coding all parts of the front page, fundraising page, biography page, issues page, news page, and multimedia page; coders did not follow links to other sites.

The sites were coded using measures we describe in the first column of Table 1. For example, we measured issue campaigning in three ways: the number of partisan-owned issues discussed, the number of unambiguous positions taken, and the number of endorsements listed. We include endorsements because that is a common method by which voters infer issue positions (e.g., Lupia, 1994). Our image variable breaks out leadership and compassion/empathy, whereas the incumbency factors code for experience, familiarity, and district actions.

To assess the relative likelihood of incumbents and challengers employing each type of strategy, we produced expected values on each variable. The values came from a set of regressions (with control variables) presented in the online appendix. Specifically, we set other variables at their mean values and then generated a predicted value for incumbents and then for challengers. The results, reported in the second column of Table 1, make clear that challengers are substantially more likely to employ an issue/image strategy, on all dimensions. All differences between incumbents and challengers are statistically significant at the .05 level. For example, virtually all challengers go negative—there is an average probability of .98 that they do so as opposed to .62 for incumbents. Challengers are also substantially more likely to emphasize partisan issues, take positions, and report endorsements. Challengers put more weight on image as well—for instance, the probability that a challenger makes a leadership type statement is .56 compared with .34 for an incumbent. On the flip side, incumbents are dramatically more likely to use a homestyle strategy by emphasizing experience, familiarity, and taking actions on behalf of the district (e.g., they make, on average, four more statements about actions they have taken for the district). Candidates do not engage in a dialogue, but rather focus on the criteria that likely advantage them—and for incumbents, that means simply emphasizing being an incumbent.

Table 1. Candidate Website Features.

Measure	Predicted values[a]
Issue/image strategy	
Negativity	
Whether the candidate had any negativity (toward the opponent) on the site (Probability of negativity)	Incumbent: 0.62 (*SE* = 0.07) Challenger: 0.98 (*SE* = 0.02)
Issues	
Weighted relative public opinion partisan advantage of issues discussed on the site[b] (scale from −17.5% to 12.85%, is average public opinion advantage for candidate's party on issues mentioned)	Incumbent: 0.20 (*SE* = 0.26) Challenger: 1.98 (*SE* = 0.29)
Number of unambiguous issue positions taken on the site (0-33)[c]	Incumbent: 11.65 (*SE* = 0.58) Challenger: 13.67 (*SE* = 0.76)
Number of endorsements on the site (0-311)[d]	Incumbent: 10.85 (*SE* = 1.88) Challenger: 16.68 (*SE* = 3.17)
Image[e]	
Whether the candidate made a statement about leadership (i.e., why running for office and the direction he or she will go if elected) on the front page or biography page (probability of leadership statement)	Incumbent: 0.34 (*SE* = 0.05) Challenger: 0.56 (*SE* = 0.06)
Whether the candidate made a statement that signals compassion or empathy (i.e., details about his or her family) on the front page or biography page (probability of empathy statement)	Incumbent: 0.47 (*SE* = 0.05) Challenger: 0.67 (*SE* = 0.05)
Homestyle strategy[f]	
Whether the candidate made a statement about experience (i.e., holding prior office) on the front page or biography page (probability of experience statement)	Incumbent: 0.50 (*SE* = 0.06). Challenger: 0.25 (*SE* = 0.12)
Whether the candidate made a statement about being familiar with the district on the site (i.e., growing up or being from the district) on the front page or biography page (probability of familiarity statement)	Incumbent: 0.60 (*SE* = 0.05) Challenger: 0.41 (*SE* = 0.06)
Number of statements the candidate made about actions taken to benefit the district (e.g., including organizing events or working legislation) on the site (0-31)	Incumbent: 6.65 (*SE* = 0.71) Challenger: 2.29 (*SE* = 0.28)

[a]We computed predicted values using *Clarify* (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000).

[b]To compute this, we collected data from polls on the public's perception of which party "owned" each issue (i.e., handled the issue better). For each issue mentioned on a candidate's site, we took the average public opinion difference over all issues resulting in a partisan ownership variable, with higher scores indicating increased ownership by the candidate's party (see Hayes, 2005).

[c]Audios and videos were not coded for this variable.

[d]Audios and videos were not coded for this variable.

[e]Statements about honesty were not coded. The operationalizations of leadership and compassion/empathy match those used in our experiment (also see Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009 for rationale).

[f]The operationalizations match those used in our experiment (also see Druckman et al., 2009, for rationale). Audios and videos were not coded for the action variable.

27

Experiment

Now that we have shown the approaches candidates employ, we turn to a test of our predictions about the impact of these rhetorical strategies. We do this with an experiment that allows us to control what messages voters receive, and arrive at clear inferences about the impact of those communications. We minimize the downside of such an approach by using real candidates, which, in some sense, is critical to ensure respondents have prior opinions about the incumbent. Specifically, we focus on the 2010 House election in Illinois' 9th District that pitted incumbent Democrat Jan Schakowsky against Republican challenger Joel Pollak. The district mirrors the partisan lopsidedness of the bulk of districts in the United States (e.g., in 2012, 65% of the 9th District voted for Obama; Abramowitz, Alexander, & Gunning, 2006; Jacobson, 2013). Yet, 2010 was the only year in decades with a bona fide challenger for the seat.

The increased expectation of competitiveness reflected, in part, Schakowsky's brief consideration of not pursuing reelection and instead running for the Senate. She also had some personal controversy with her husband pleading guilty to tax withholding and bank fraud charges. The 2010 challenger Joel Pollak had long-standing ties to the district and was an outspoken advocate of Israel in a district with a sizable Jewish population. He also had received national attention for a public exchange with Barney Frank and was endorsed by the Chicago Tea Party. Even so, in the end, Schakowsky beat Pollak 66% to 31%.

We recognize that our use of a female candidate running against a male candidate could complicate matters, although the literature on voting and gender offers mixed evidence on whether candidate gender affects voting behaviors (e.g., Brooks, 2013). Regardless, one possibility that we explore in the online appendix is whether explicit campaigning on leadership by Schakowsky (when she uses an issue/image strategy) primes that trait because it is otherwise not often associated with women candidates (e.g., Dolan, 2010; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). The online appendix also offers additional details on the district and the 2010 election.[6]

Procedure and Design

We conducted the experiment from June to August 2010, which encapsulated the start of the campaign but was prior to major campaign activity.[7] We hired a professional website designer to create Schakowsky and Pollak websites that drew content from the candidates' own webpages, candidate speeches, news coverage, and, for Schakowsky, floor votes. We then used fliers and

emails to recruit 395 participants from multiple colleges in the district and the surrounding communities. Participants had to be eligible to vote in the district and received $10 compensation for their time. We provide a demographic portrait of the sample in the online appendix.

The study took place in a laboratory setting at predetermined times. On arrival, participants consented and then were provided with a packet. The packet explained that the participant would read a brief overview of the ongoing U.S. congressional campaign, have 20 minutes to explore websites about the candidates, and then be asked to complete a survey. The overview included (a) a map of the district and pictures of the two candidates, (b) a statement that many expected it to be the most competitive district race in some time, (c) an instruction that the participant would have the next 20 minutes to explore websites for each candidate, and (4) an instruction that time could be allocated in any manner, including not browsing and instead reading magazines or newspapers we provided.

Each candidate site had a front page with links to an issues page, a biography page, and, for some conditions, an endorsements page. Our hypotheses require varying the candidates' rhetorical strategies; we did this by randomly assigning participants to one of five conditions. One condition served as a control, in which case, the aforementioned directions were different, with individuals spending time on non–campaign-related websites and subsequently completing the survey described below. The other conditions varied whether each candidate's website displayed factors consistent with the homestyle strategy or the issue/image strategy. In Table 2, we show the details of each strategy, echoing the variables analyzed in our website coding (see Table 1).[8] For example, the issue/image strategy involved taking several clear issue positions, offering endorsements, and discussing the candidate's image; the homestyle strategy largely avoided this information and, instead, focused on familiarity and actions for the district.[9]

In Table 3, we present a portrait of the four mixes of websites to which a given respondent was (randomly) given access: Schakowsky issue/image × Pollak issue/image, Schakowsky issue/image × Pollak homestyle, Schakowsky homestyle × Pollak issue/image, or Schakowsky homestyle × Pollak homestyle.[10] This mix of conditions allows us to see whether campaign strategy, all else constant, matters in the ways we predict.[11]

After browsing the websites for up to 20 minutes, respondents completed a survey that asked about their perceptions of the candidates and election, as well as basic demographic and political information. The survey included a question that asked how likely the respondent was to vote for Pollak or Schakowsky on a 7-point scale ranging from *definitely will vote for Pollak* to *definitely will vote for Schakowsky*. The survey also asked respondents to

Table 2. Website Features.

	Issue/image strategy	Homestyle strategy
Negativity[a]	Negative statements about the opponent (on the front page and issues page)	None
Issues	Four party-owned issues, one nonowned issue (3 on front page, 5 on issues page)[b]	Five non–party-owned issues listed (2 on front page, 5 on issues page)[b]
	Three clear issue positions (on issues page)[c]	One clear issue position (on issues page)[c]
	Thirteen endorsements (on distinct endorsements page)[d]	Five endorsements (on issues page)[d]
Image[e]	Statements about honesty, compassion/empathy, and leadership (on front page briefly and in detail on biography page)	None
Homestyle[f]	None	Statements about familiarity, and actions taken on behalf of district (on front page briefly and in detail on biography page)

[a]For example, on the issue/image Pollak site, the front page included a statement that "It is time to replace Representative Jan Schakowsky; she is out of touch . . .," and the issue-page included, " . . . Schakowsky cannot be trusted . . . "

[b]We identified party-owned issues based on public opinion data at the time; the five nonowned issues were taxes, deficit, immigration, morals/ethics, and government reform. The Democratic-owned issues were health care, energy, education, and social security. The Republican-owned issues were Homeland Security/terrorism, business, crime, and foreign policy/Middle East (Druckman, Hennessy, Kifer, & Parkin, 2010, for details on the construction of party ownership measures).

[c]For the Schakowsky issue/image strategy, the issue positions were on health care, energy, and education; for the Schakowsky incumbent strategy, the issue position was on taxes. For the Pollak issue/image strategy, the issue positions were on Homeland Security/terrorism, foreign policy/Middle East, and business. For the Pollak incumbent strategy, the issue position was on government reform.

[d]The endorsements came from well-known or fairly identifiable groups.

[e]We operationalized variables as done in Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin (2009); honesty involved statements about trust; empathy involved family details; and leadership involved statements about running for office. We also included polls favorable to the given candidate for the issue/image (but not homestyle) sites (see Druckman et al., 2009).

[f]We operationalized these as coded in Druckman et al. (2009); thus, familiarity involved statements about ties to district/history; and actions involved statements about participation in events, assistance, and so forth.

rate, on 7-point scales, how well different traits including honesty, leadership, and compassion (empathy) fit each candidate. We created relative trait assessment measures by subtracting the rating for Pollak from the rating for

Table 3. Experimental Conditions.

	Pollak issue/image	Pollak homestyle
Schakowsky issue/image	2	3
Schakowsky homestyle	4	5

Note. 1 = control group.

Schakowsky for each item (and, thus, higher scores indicated relatively better perceptions of Schakowsky; the theoretical range for the scale for each trait is −6 to 6).[12] We further asked participants to report their own issue position and each candidate's position on 13 issues (all on 7-point scales). For each issue, we took the difference of the respondent's position from each candidate's position, and then took the average difference (across all issues) for each candidate. That provided us with scores that indicated how close the respondent felt his or her issue positions, on average, were to each candidate.[13] We then took the difference between these two scores to arrive at an overall relative policy position proximity score, such that higher scores indicate greater perceived issue agreement with Schakowsky (the theoretical range for the scale is −6 to 6).[14]

To gauge perceptions of incumbency features, we asked respondents to score which candidate they believed possessed greater experience, greater familiarity, and had taken more actions on behalf of voters in the district (on 7-point scales with higher scores moving toward Schakowsky). We took the average across these items to arrive at an "incumbency" factor score.[15] We will use the incumbency factor score to test Hypothesis 1—that the incumbent is always favored on these features, regardless of rhetoric. We then will regress the aforementioned vote measure (which will then be our dependent variable) on our policy, trait, and incumbency variables (which will be our independent variables), to test our Hypothesis 3 that policy and traits only should matter when the incumbent uses an issue/image strategy.

We also measured how close respondents thought the election would be on a 7-point scale, from *not close at all* to *very close*. This allows us to test Hypothesis 2 about perceived closeness being driven by the incumbent's use of the issue/image strategy. Finally, the survey asked for participants' partisan identification (with higher scores, on a 7-point scale, indicating more Republican), gender, race/ethnicity (recoded to identify minority respondents), age (offering five age ranges), income (offering five income ranges), and education (offering five levels of highest education). All question wordings are in the online appendix. Participants were debriefed after completing the survey.

Table 4. Homestyle and Election Closeness Scores.

	Homestyle (1-7 scale, toward Schakowsky)	Election closeness (1-7 scale, toward close)
1. Control	5.05	3.18
	(1.40, 44)	(1.13, 44)
2. Schakowsky issue/image or Pollak issue/image	5.18	3.90
	(1.22, 80)	(1.17, 80)
3. Schakowsky issue/image or Pollak homestyle	5.20	3.89
	(1.17, 84)	(1.21, 84)
4. Schakowsky homestyle or Pollak issue/image	5.23	3.27
	(1.34, 91)	(1.17, 92)
5. Schakowsky homestyle or Pollak homestyle	5.27	3.19
	(1.46, 94)	(1.09, 93)
Overall	5.20	3.50
	(1.31, 393)	(1.20, 393)

Note. Entries are averages with standard deviations and *N* in parentheses.

Results

Our first hypothesis suggests that incumbents are inherently favored—regardless of the campaign—on the incumbency features of experience, familiarity, and actions for the district. We also predicted, in our second hypothesis, that when the incumbent employs an issue/image strategy, it will signal to voters that the election is more competitive or close. We test these two hypotheses, respectively, by reporting the mean scores by condition for our aggregated incumbency feature variable and our measure of perceived election closeness. The results are in Table 4. We see strong support for Hypothesis 1: The incumbency factors are invariant to campaign rhetoric. The mean scores not only strongly favor Schakowsky, with an overall average of 5.20, but also do not significantly differ based on rhetoric. For instance, the lowest mean score is the control group with 5.05, and the highest is 5.27 (Condition 5). These two do not differ significantly ($t_{136} = 0.84, p \leq .40$, for a two-tailed test).

This result accentuates just how privileged incumbents can be. Even when the challenger highlights his experience, familiarity, and district actions, it does nothing to dislodge the inherent preference for the incumbent on these dimensions. The incumbent's advantage is further made clear in the second column of Table 4 where we see strong support for Hypothesis 2. Respondents are significantly more likely to perceive the election as close *only* when the incumbent Schakowsky employs an issue/image strategy. For example, in

Condition 2 where both candidates use an issue/image strategy, the mean perceived closeness is 3.90. This is substantially larger than the 3.27 score in Condition 4, where Pollak highlights issues and image, but Schakowsky does not ($t_{170} = 3.52$, $p \leq .01$, for a two-tailed test). Overall, the combined mean score for the incumbent issue/image conditions (i.e., Conditions 2 and 3) is 3.90, whereas the combined mean score for the other conditions is 3.22 ($t_{391} = 5.73$, $p \leq .01$, for a two-tailed test). It is the incumbent's actions, regardless of what the challenger does, that signal a closer election.

We next explore the determinants of vote preference. Specifically, we regress the vote preference variable on the incumbency factors, trait perceptions, and policy positions, along with party identification, and other demographic variables. Recall the former four variables are all coded such that higher values reflect movement toward Schakowsky. The first column of Table 5 shows that as an individual's ratings for Schakowsky on incumbency, traits, and policy increase, so does the likelihood that he or she will vote for Schakowsky. The negative coefficient on partisanship shows that as one moves in a Republican direction, he or she becomes less likely to vote for the Democrat Schakowsky. No other variables correlate with vote preference.

Recall that Hypothesis 3 suggested that voters will be particularly likely to rely on traits and policy *only* when the incumbent uses an image/issue strategy. We test this by adding interactions between (a) a variable indicating experimental conditions where Schakowsky uses an image/issue strategy (Conditions 2 and 3) and (b) the traits, policy, and incumbency factor variables. We also add analogous interactions for when Pollak uses an image/issue strategy—we expect Pollak's rhetoric will not matter here. The second column of Table 5 shows exactly that. Specifically, we see highly significant interactions between the incumbent using an issue/image strategy and voters considering policy and traits when thinking of their vote preference. Moreover, the negative interaction with the incumbency factors variable reveals that when the incumbent primes issues/image, voters move away from the very considerations on which the incumbent is inherently favored. The set of nonsignificant interactions with the challenger issue/image strategy make clear that it is the incumbent and not the challenger who has the power to alter the nature of voter decision making. This confirms Hypothesis 3.[16]

To see the substantive impact of these rhetorical choices, consider a situation where Pollak happens to be modestly favored by the electorate on both policy and traits; specifically, assume on each of the scales that run from −6 to 6, with higher scores moving toward Schakowsky, that the average voter locates at a −1. If Pollak employs an issue/image strategy but Schakowsky goes homestyle, the average vote preference, on the 7-point scale, is 4.48 (*SE* = 0.25)[17]—that is, a clear win for Schakowsky even though Pollak tries to

Table 5. Vote Preference Regressions.

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)
Incumbency factors	0.448***	0.621***
	(0.054)	(0.078)
Candidate traits	0.177***	0.119
	(0.056)	(0.097)
Policy	0.384***	0.225**
	(0.067)	(0.101)
Party ID (Rep.)	−0.158***	−0.117**
	(0.051)	(0.049)
Female	0.038	0.069
	(0.137)	(0.130)
Minority	−0.154	0.042
	(0.160)	(0.155)
Age	−0.009	0.018
	(0.082)	(0.078)
Income	−0.045	−0.068
	(0.058)	(0.055)
Education	−0.020	0.043
	(0.092)	(0.088)
Incumbent issue/image		1.672***
		(0.549)
Incumbent Issue/Image × Incumbent Factors		−0.453***
		(0.106)
Incumbent Issue/Image × Traits		0.218**
		(0.106)
Incumbent Issue/Image × Policy		0.384***
		(0.114)
Challenger issue/image		−0.277
		(0.534)
Challenger Issue/Image × Incumbent Factors		−0.030
		(0.103)
Challenger Issue/Image × Traits		−0.015
		(0.106)
Challenger Issue/Image × Policy		0.083
		(0.117)
Constant	3.026***	2.082***
	(0.508)	(0.562)
Observations	344	344
R^2	.502	.571

Note. Entries are ordinary least squares coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .1$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed tests).

prime issues and image. This dramatically changes if Schakowsky also employs an issue/image strategy with the predicted vote average becoming 3.01 (SE=0.36): a 24.5% shift leading to Pollak having an edge. Clearly, it is the incumbent's strategy that matters.[18]

In sum, voters rely on the easily accessible and well-known incumbency factors unless there is a signal to pay attention and process new trait and policy information (see Ashworth et al., 2018; Fowler, 2018). That signal, at least when it comes to campaign rhetoric, is contingent on the behavior of the incumbent using a strategy that is *not* in his or her interest to use.[19] In short, the *campaign is a mechanism through which the incumbency advantage works*. The factors that bias voters toward the incumbent incentivize the incumbent to focus only on those criteria, and that, in turn, ensures the incumbency advantage. The challenger is in an unenviable situation, given his or her campaign strategy cannot, on its own, induce voters to consider the criteria that could advantage him or her.

Conclusion

Scholars and pundits have long worried about how inequities in campaign spending and donations undermine democratic functioning. Part of this concern is that only well-resourced, quality challengers could possibly mount an effective campaign against incumbents. In many ways, our framework and results point to an equally troublesome dynamic. For us, resources are held constant: The only variation concerns whether a candidate was an incumbent who used that position to gain experience, establish familiarity, and take actions on behalf of the district. These are all activities that, on their face, are unproblematic (Fowler, 2016). Yet, an inadvertent consequence is that voters privilege incumbents. Voters' limited attention and motivation makes it extremely difficult for a challenger to launch a winning campaign. In our experiment, the challenger would have had to rely on the incumbent making a miscalculation to even open the door for voters to consider criteria on which he possibly could have competed.

Our study has clear limitations, given the (experimental) focus on one particular campaign in a district with a highly favored incumbent. We also did not attend to other factors that can induce perceptions of competition. Our results, though, accentuate some key questions such as the following: What other situational levers stimulate perceived competition? When do they induce candidates to campaign differently? To what extent do campaigns, in varying scenarios, change electoral outcomes? How much of the incumbency advantage comes from the campaign rhetoric, as opposed to systematic or candidate-specific reasons? Despite voluminous literatures on congressional

elections and campaign effects, these questions have gone largely unaddressed.[20] Furthermore, these questions connect to other studies of incumbency advantage. For example, are potentially high-quality challengers deterred due to the anticipation of campaign dynamics that disadvantage them? Zaller (1998) points to incumbents' political skills as deterring challengers from running (also see Levitt & Wolfram, 1997): Is campaign ability that key political skill?

Our results also raise some important normative questions. Kelley (1960) long ago noted that campaigns ideally "expose the grounds on which candidates disagree and the differences between the candidates—differences of personality, interest, affiliation, policy commitment, and all others that may affect performance in office" (p. 14). Campaigns are "*the* main point . . . of contact between officials and the populace over matters of public policy . . . responsibility is imposed during campaigns and the elections in which they culminate" (Riker, 1996, p. 3, italics in the original). Our finding that incumbents do not engage and that voters rely on nonsubstantive criteria makes even basic theories of retrospective accountability difficult to satisfy (for discussion, see Druckman, 2014).

To be clear, it is certainly reasonable to expect that voters will choose high-quality candidates (Ashworth & Bueno de Mesquita, 2008; Fowler, 2016) and that incumbents will win reelection in districts with favorable partisan constituencies (Jacobson, 2015). After all, Republican districts should naturally elect Republican lawmakers, whereas Democratic districts elect Democratic lawmakers. However, the problem for democratic theory comes from the fact that voters are biased in favor of incumbent *rhetoric*. The rhetorical strategy commonly used by incumbents may be less powerful in terms of rival party defections (Jacobson, 2015), but it remains decisive in terms of supporters and independents, which ultimately results in easy reelection in most cases. The key is that voters reward incumbents for doing next to nothing, whereas challengers are punished (or at least not rewarded) for trying to start the kind of substantive debate that should be the center of all elections. Districts should get the representatives they want but, ideally, the election outcome should be the result of a vigorous exchange of ideas—that is, a process in which campaign rhetoric leads voters to seriously consider their choices. There is nothing normatively wrong with high-quality incumbents winning reelection, but there is something wrong with their ability to win reelection by doing little more than reminding voters that they are incumbents.

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ORCID iD

Martin J. Kifer 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3393-9079

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Although the incumbency advantage has shrunk in recent years—due to increased party loyalty and straight-ticket voting as well as the nationalization of congressional elections—incumbents still win reelection at remarkably high rates (Jacobson, 2015). In fact, in some sense, the fact that the incumbency advantage remains in the face of partisan sorting and nationalization makes it even more pressing to understand how the bias works (for recent work, see, for example, Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, & Friedenberg, 2018; Fowler, 2018).
2. See, for example, Mann and Wolfinger (1980), Cox and Katz (2002), Prior (2006), Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008), Stone, Fulton, Maestas, and Maisel (2010), Eckles, Kam, Maestas, and Schaffner (2014), Hall (2014), Hall and Snyder (2015), and Fowler (2016). Other work studies representative communications and their effects (Grimmer, 2013, 2016; also see Fenno, 1978; Mayhew, 1974), but not as it applies directly to the incumbency advantage.
3. Competition signals to voters that their choices may matter, and so, they invest more at arriving at their opinions. Evidence along these lines is that participation in elections increases with perceived competition (McDonald & Tolbert, 2012).
4. This is the case because campaigns take advantage of the infinite space on the web and they realize anything posted on their sites could potentially be passed along to voters in general (e.g., via the media). Furthermore, Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin (2009, 2017) show, via surveys with campaign workers, that the websites encapsulate a candidate's entire message and are aimed at the "average voter" in the district.
5. We identified the population of candidates from the *National Journal, Congressional Quarterly*, and various state party home pages. We identified the central campaign website for each candidate via the *National Journal*'s website and/or Google searches. The websites coded were posted largely from

mid-October to Election Day. The sample composition is 80% House sites, 20% Senate sites, 44% incumbent sites, 38% challenger sites, 18% open-seat candidate sites, 48% Democratic sites, and 52% Republican sites. Furthermore, on the 4-point Cook Non-Partisan Competitiveness Scale, 18% were toss-ups, 15% were likely, 12% were leaning, and 55% were solid. These percentages match the population of campaigns very well.

6. We also looked at Pollak and Schakowsky's actual 2010 websites. This confirmed that they generally followed the pattern found in our analysis of other 2010 congressional candidate websites. Although Schakowsky's website included some negativity, Pollak's site was awash in negative statements attacking the incumbent. Pollak also took clear positions on 31 issues (compared with 12 for Schakowsky), mentioned four endorsements (compared with two for Schakowsky), and highlighted leadership. The only strategy that Schakowsky employed more than Pollak was, predictably, mentioning six actions she had taken for the benefit of the district (whereas Pollak mentioned none).

7. This ensured realism while minimizing the risk of strong pretreatment effects (Druckman & Leeper, 2012) and/or incomparability of participants during the implementation period (e.g., due to major campaign events).

8. We recognize that when it comes to issue positions and endorsements, the experiment includes fewer of each than is suggested by our web content analysis results. This reflects that many of the candidate web pages were much larger than the ones we could reasonably present in the experiment given time limitations. Also, we do not vary prior experience in office because Pollak had none and, thus, we could not realistically vary it.

9. We extensively pretested the content to ensure our operationalization accurately captured the constructs described in Table 2 (e.g., positions were clearly taken or not, personal features involved the given category). The pretest also gauged the leaning of the endorsers we used on the pages, showing that, for the most part, they were perceived in the correct partisan direction (i.e., Democratic for Schakowsky, Republican for Pollak). Details on the pretest are in the online appendix.

10. Our interest is mainly in Conditions 2 through 5, where respondents are exposed to varying types of candidate rhetoric; for that reason, as well as practical considerations (e.g., resources), we collected a smaller sample for the control condition.

11. We opted to not vary competitiveness or the quality of the challenger so as to keep a clear focus on campaign rhetoric. Of course, all these factors—quality, competitiveness, and rhetoric—affect one another. Our goal here is to establish the importance of rhetoric at which point, future work can incorporate quality and competitiveness into a similar design.

12. The three traits scale together with an alpha of .60. This is not particularly high and, thus, in the online appendix, we present results with each individual trait measure.

13. For Pollak, the alpha is .85; for Schakowsky, the alpha is .80.

14. For example, we measured the respondent's issue position (on a 7-point scale) on whether the government should promote renewable energy sources. We also

asked the respondent where he or she thought each candidate's issue position fell on that issue. We took the difference between the respondent's energy position and each perceived candidate position (the range then for this is 0 to 6). This gave us a score of "issue proximity" between the respondent and each candidate (i.e., proximity of energy position to Pollak and proximity of energy position to Schakowsky). We did this on all 13 issues and then took the average issue proximity score for each candidate (i.e., average closeness to Pollak across all issues and average closeness to Schakowsky across all issues). In this case, smaller scores indicate being closer to the given candidate on the issues. We then subtracted the overall Schakowsky score from the overall Pollak score (leading to a range of −6 to 6). Thus, 0 indicates indifference, positive scores indicate closeness to Schakowsky (i.e., the difference between the respondent and Schakowsky is smaller than the difference between the respondent and Pollak), and negative scores indicate closeness to Pollak.

15. The alpha is .80.
16. It could be that respondents are projecting from their vote choice to perceived policy positions and traits (although see Hart & Middleton, 2014). However, even if they are doing that, the fact remains that the relationship between vote preference, traits, and policy is contingent on the incumbent's strategy. It also is possible that instead of this occurring through priming, this process is more akin to learning (Lenz, 2013); from a theoretical standpoint, we are agnostic on this point because our focus is on which information voters are using and how the campaigns affect that. Finally, in the online appendix, we demonstrate that our results are robust to including additional interactions with different experimental conditions.
17. We compute predicted values using *Clarify* (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000).
18. This example, though, is hypothetical. In actuality, respondents in our study preferred Schakowsky on both policy and traits, regardless of the experimental conditions. Put another way, Pollak failed to persuade voters even when they did rely on policy and traits in their decisions. In fact, in some cases, Pollak's discussion of issues and images backfired and voters moved against him further. Details are in the online appendix. Our point, though, is that in the abstract, Pollak could have been favored on these criteria, which is not the case when it comes to incumbency factors.
19. The Table 5 results are robust if we instead use an ordered probit model. Also, recall that the alpha was relatively low for our trait variable. We, thus—in the online appendix—rerun Table 5, Model 2, where we include the three individual trait measures (honesty, compassion, and leadership) instead of the single aggregate measure. We find that the trait effect displayed in Table 5, Model 2, is driven by leadership. As mentioned in the text, this is interesting insofar as it may be that explicit attention to leadership primed it, as some work suggests, it is otherwise counterstereotypic (e.g., Dolan, 2010; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993).
20. Of particular relevance is the connection between how candidates choose strategies and their perception of competitiveness. That is, it may be that certain

triggers stimulate incumbents to anticipate attentive voters and engage in an issue/image strategy to cater to the criteria on which voters may decide. That said, Enos and Hersh (2017) find that campaigns tend to be overconfident, and that incumbents are more accurate in assessing electoral closeness.

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Author Biographies

James N. Druckman is the Payson S. Wild professor of Political Science and a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. He studies political communication and preference formation, and is the co-principal investigator of Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences. More information can be found at: http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/.

Martin J. Kifer is an associate professor of Political Science at High Point University (HPU). He is also the director of HPU's interdisciplinary Survey Research Center.

Michael Parkin is the Erwin N. Griswold professor of Politics at Oberlin College. His research and teaching interests are in campaign communications with a particular focus on candidate use of new media. He is the author of *Talk Show Campaigns: Presidential Candidates on Daytime and Late Night Television*.